

TRAINING EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP  
THROUGH  
LISTENING PRAYER

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **TRAINING EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP THROUGH LISTENING PRAYER**

by  
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United Theological Seminary, 2024

#### **Mentors**

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Wesley United Methodist Church in Vienna, Virginia, does not show sufficient empathy in ministry. To address this issue, a seven-week prayer study was offered for lay leaders in a small group setting. The hypothesis is that if lay leaders learn and practice listening prayer in their daily lives, it will enable them to be empathetic by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in the ministry. The qualitative research methodology was used to analyze the project. This includes pre-project and post-project surveys, group discussions, and focused individual interviews.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I am grateful to God, who has surprisingly led my journey—from a dream of an architect to a dream of a pastor twenty-two years ago, from South Korea to the United States fifteen years ago, and from no plan of further study to this rewarding learning opportunity. Undoubtedly, all the adventures called and guided by God were always greater than mine and made me humbler.

I am also grateful to my two most incredible mentors, Bishop Young Jin Cho and Reverend and Doctor HiRho Park. Their inspirational academic and spiritual guidance built the foundation of my study and growth and modeled well-balanced spiritual leadership between theological knowledge and practical ministry. Particularly, learning closely from Doctor HiRho Park was a great asset to this program as she is an excellent model as an Asian female scholar and pastor. I also extend my acknowledgements to Reverends and Doctors Young Bong Kim and Woo Min Lee, who supported the last half of the program as a mentor and faculty consultant, respectively.

I also extend my appreciation to my Professional Associates, Reverends and Doctors Michelle Holmes Chaney, Michelle Kim, and Isil Yoon; and my Context Associates, Janice Baresel and Wade Wells. Their academic knowledge and professional backgrounds enhanced the quality of the entire project development, implementation, and completion.

Lastly, I am grateful for the love, support, and prayer of those I call my family. This Doctor of Ministry would never come to an end without them. My parents, Jaesun Kim and Myungsook Lee, in South Korea, highly valued my further study and never doubted its completion. My second parents, God-parents, Reverend Michael and Debbie Whaley, are always proud of my academic pursuits and every single achievement. I also extend my appreciation to the special people in my life. Seokweon Jeon, my long-time friend, has played remarkable roles as a listener, proofreader, unofficial professional associate, and even Mitzi-sitter, since the first days I suddenly explored this learning opportunity. Reverend Mikang Kim, my sister in spirit, and I have had our pastoral and academic journey together since we came to the United States in 2009. Countless days and nights we spent together in Dayton, Ohio, and different parts of Virginia through a gift of technology enabled me to complete this journey, not alone. I also appreciate Reverend Won Gyu Lee's encouragement, support, and humble curiosity as a respectful colleague in ministry and my Peer Associate on this journey. My dear churches, St. Stephen's United Methodist Church and Wesley United Methodist Church, fully supported my academic journey. The pastors, staff, and lay leaders that I served along with taught me to see who I was and made me become a better person and pastor who strives to be an empathetic spiritual leader.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this study to my parents, Jaesun Kim and Myungsook Lee. No words express my profound gratitude for their self-giving, outpouring love toward me. Since I was young, their sacrifice behind the scenes has exemplified the power of silence and actions without words, and their fervent prayer and faithfulness have led me to find God and God's guidance more often in my life. Undoubtedly, they are the foundation of this study.

My parents named me Jiyeon, meaning wisdom and beauty, which inspires and reminds me every day of the source of wisdom and beauty, God. They led me to take piano lessons for over ten years from age four. This learning opportunity taught me the universal language of music that still greatly serves my ministry. They fully supported my education over twenty years despite a severe financial deficiency in my family. Their educational support made me the first college graduate in my family. Their never-ending love enabled me to sense God's love and look for a better understanding of God as a child of God and a servant of God. Their presence and love in my life have been revealed in this study, even though they are not actually found. Therefore, this study is not my completion but my parents' completion through me and God's completion through my family. Thanks be to God for my parents.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CEB	Common English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
SAS	Simplified, Accountable Structure
UMC	The United Methodist Church
YHWH	The Tetragrammaton, Name of God
WFMS	Woman's Foreign Missionary Society

Rejoice with those who rejoice; and mourn with those who mourn.

—Romans 12:15, New International Version

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study was designed and developed to train empathetic leadership through listening prayer at Wesley United Methodist Church (UMC) in Vienna, Virginia. Its purpose is supported by my thought that empathy and listening prayer are the key components of spiritual leadership. Empathy is essential in training spiritual leaders who understand God's heart toward humanity and deeply share others' feelings. Listening prayer is a spiritual tool for leaders, helping them to understand God's empathetic heart, listen to God's voice, and attentively pay attention to others' viewpoints and needs. The leadership often represents only a small part of the faith community, which is not the voice of the entire body. This leads to significant disconnection and separation between the leadership and the community.

Leadership without sufficient empathy has difficulty listening to various voices and opinions and embracing them in the faith community. That is because the leadership has no willingness to open themselves to different perspectives, which might cause disagreement, debate, change, conflict, discomfort, and even split and division in difficult situations. The problem of ministry without empathy can be solved when listening prayer is learned and its culture is created in the leadership. That is because listening prayer enables leaders to pay attention to God's voice, which is not often heard. Listening prayer also leads the leadership to create a room in heart and mind for a new direction, idea, situation, and possibility. It ultimately enables the leadership to embrace different voices

and needs empathetically into the church ministry as leaders begin to direct their focus from themselves to others. Empathetic spiritual leaders who learn and practice listening prayer understand the significance of listening and obtain a willingness to listen to others' voices and embrace their needs in ministry. Thus, empathy as a primary factor and listening prayer as a fundamental tool sustain this study to train empathetic leadership in a local church setting, targeting lay leadership.

The primary purposes of this study are education and practice. The project is designed for lay leaders to educate and practice listening prayer in their daily lives, aiming to train empathetic leadership by offering a seven-week prayer study in a small group setting. The educational element includes learning about listening prayer and the significance of empathy in a ministry setting. The practical part consists of a group and personal practice of listening prayer and sharing personal reflections about their practice of listening prayer. All the learning and practice help the participants experience and discover the significance of listening prayer in ministry, while creating a regular rhythm of listening prayer in their daily lives and listening to the voice of God. The project hypothesis is that if lay leaders learn and practice listening prayer in their daily lives, it will enable them to be empathetic by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in the ministry.

The first five chapters outline and undergird the need for empathetic leadership in a local church and for listening prayer to develop and nurture empathetic leadership. Chapter one explains the historical, geographic, and demographic context of Wesley UMC and presents the need for listening space and prayer culture to grow in the church of God. This section also describes the development of my identity as a child of God and

a called servant of God in spite of my language barriers and ethnicity. Together, it undergirds the need for training listening leadership and becoming an empathetic church.

Chapter two establishes biblical foundations for the project through the narrative of Elijah and the widow in Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8-16 and investigates Elijah's identity as a person of God, a person of prayer, and a person of empathy. The passage addresses God's sovereign and omnipotent power beyond cultural and religious boundaries as well as Elijah's spiritual leadership through his empathetic interaction with the widow in a desperate situation and his prayerful life.

Chapter three explores the Korean Bible Women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an example of empathetic spiritual leaders in the unique historical context. Korean Bible Women served as female lay evangelists at the beginning of Korean Protestant Christianity despite cultural, missional, and social obstacles. They greatly contributed to Korean Protestantism's growth in the first decades. Their lay leadership shows the power of self-giving spiritual leadership grounded on empathy and prayer.

Chapter four solidifies theological foundations with the doctrine of the incarnation as God's inevitable self-revelation stemming from God's empathy toward humanity. It asserts that incarnation is the most powerful and holiest divine intervention in human life and history. Jesus' earthly life is the most evident example of God's empathetic presence for all human beings as he lived on earth in human form among humans. Understanding God *in* Jesus provides the need for empathetic spiritual leadership, as shown in God's incarnated living history.

Chapter five suggests interdisciplinary foundations through Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory, also known as active listening theory, supporting the power of empathetic listening. The theory proposes a lens of empathy as a trainable and teachable technique and a problem solution by switching the perspective from a speaker to a listener who reads meaning and nonverbal language. This supports the need for listening prayer, which is a practice of God-centered life and ministry, as it focuses on God's heart and mind, not one's own.

The final chapter sets forth a thorough analysis of the seven-week project, including the project methodology, implementation, data analysis, and project outcomes. It establishes project effectiveness—showing how this seven-week prayer study enhanced the participants' attitudes, prayer life, and leadership change. It also includes considerations for further improvement, including additional research to train and nurture empathetic leadership through listening prayer.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **MINISTRY FOCUS**

Wesley United Methodist Church (UMC) is a medium, white-dominant congregation of 900 members in Vienna, Virginia. Its vision is “to share our love for God and for all people in everything we do. We will continue to welcome all, encourage all, grow together, and live what we learned, until everyone in this world experiences that they are loved.”<sup>1</sup> The church was planted in 1890 when the community was developed. It has a rich history of 133 years with various changes. This chapter provides historical, geographic, and demographic descriptions of the church as a United Methodist Church, fulfilling its mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”<sup>2</sup> It also analyzes pastoral and lay leadership of the church in the last two decades and describes the present ministry through the lenses of the lack of empathy in leadership and the necessity for listening prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley United Methodist Church, accessed September 13, 2022, <https://wesleyvienna.org>.

<sup>2</sup> United Methodist Publishing House, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 93.

## Historical Descriptions

### *Beginning, Continued Growth, and Expansion*

The history of Wesley United Methodist Church (UMC) started in the late 19th century when the community and Methodism grew. Many farm families began to meet in the old Freedom Hill schoolhouse in Vienna, Virginia, in the early 1870s; and it became Wesley Chapel. Rev. Wells Sherman served as the first pastor of the church and as the local preacher in the area.<sup>3</sup>

When a gift of land was donated on March 12, 1890, the church began construction of its first building. The community rapidly grew and became a suburban area. In June 1954, the church leadership discerned the need for a larger facility, purchased land, and built a new church on the current site. The first service in the new building was held on September 16, 1956.<sup>4</sup>

The church grew in the next decades. It hired its first full-time Associate Minister in 1962 and a full-time Director of Christian Education in 1967. It also supported two missionaries in the 1960s. Local mission, education, and music programs were expanded, including the introduction of Wesley UMC's Preschool.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wesley United Methodist Church Directory 1996, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley United Methodist Church Directory 1996, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley United Methodist Church Directory 1996, 3.



*Diversity of Pastoral Leadership*

For the first 125 years of its existence, Wesley UMC's pastors were white males, reflecting the majority demographics of the region and the denominational clergy demographics at that time. In the early 2000s, at the request of the pastor, the church began to sponsor internships for students who were pursuing master's degrees at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. For the next several years, the church sponsored a series of Korean seminarians, two of whom were female. This experience expanded the congregation's familiarity and comfort with Koreans and laid the groundwork for the successful appointment of a Korean associate pastor who served for two years from 2015 to 2017. Upon the retirement of the Lead Pastor in 2016, a Korean pastor was appointed to the church for the position. He served Wesley UMC for six years, from 2016 until 2022. In 2022, I was appointed as the first female pastor of Wesley UMC.

Despite my concern at being the first ethnic minority clergywoman at the church, for the past year and a half with the congregation, I have experienced no issues regarding my gender, ethnicity, culture, age, or singleness. The congregation has shown openness and support toward their first young, single, ethnic clergywoman, demonstrating sensitivity to and respect for cultural differences. This openness and sensitivity are likely due to the current regional characteristics of Northern Virginia, where residents are exposed to widespread ethnic and cultural diversity, and the congregation's personal, professional, and educational backgrounds.

### *Changes and Transitions in the Recent Years*

In recent years, Wesley UMC has been impacted by various external factors. First, two small congregations in the area finished their own ministries, and their membership was transferred to Wesley UMC. Epiphany UMC closed on June 30, 2019, and 111 members transferred their membership to Wesley UMC.<sup>6</sup> Charles Wesley UMC closed on October 31, 2020, and 81 members transferred their membership to Wesley UMC.<sup>7</sup> Both congregations had active, dedicated members, but the churches struggled with building maintenance, declining membership, or the future of the church. After a prayerful discerning process, both congregations started a new faith journey at Wesley UMC. These changes created a new identity and culture in the congregation.

The second significant external influence in the life of Wesley UMC was the global pandemic that broke out in March 2020. New members from Epiphany UMC did not have even a full year of ministry together with the original members of Wesley UMC before the church was forced to interrupt in-person services. Charles Wesley UMC joined Wesley UMC during the first year of the pandemic. Due to the ongoing precautions and restrictions, these three previously separate congregations lacked sufficient opportunities to get to know each other and build a common foundation of the ministry under one roof. Since their joining, there was neither a pictorial directory nor a list of members for the

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<sup>6</sup> Kyungsuk Cho, *Pastors Statistical Report Nov 2019 471508* (Glen Allen, VA: Equipping Vital Congregation of the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, 2019), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Wesley United Methodist Church, "Transferred to Wesley UMC from Charles Wesley UMC (July 1, 2020)," *The 2020 Charge Conference* (Vienna, VA: Wesley United Methodist Church), 7.

purpose of connections. Relationship building has been a critical need among the congregation.

Wesley UMC also faced internal challenges. The church used to be well-known in the community for its successful Preschool and Vacation Bible School. Even before the pandemic, participation dwindled. Further, frequent staff changes in children and youth ministry affected every part of those ministry areas. As with all the other small and medium-sized churches in the area, youth ministry has struggled due to competition with sports games, extracurriculars, and family travels. Faithful volunteers are aged and show signs of burnout as they have played multiple leadership roles for years without training younger generations of volunteers and leaders. In the culture of Northern Virginia, young families and middle-aged workers are extremely busy with work and extra activities on weekdays and weekends and reluctant to make a commitment to the church.

### **Geographic Descriptions**

#### *Fairfax County in Virginia*

Wesley UMC is in Vienna, Virginia. Vienna is part of Fairfax County in Northern Virginia, which has one of the highest median household incomes in the United States. The county borders the west side of Washington, D.C. and the Potomac River. This location near the nation's capital led the county to be an essential region in the Civil War, and there are still many historical sites. Public transportation is well-developed, and includes the Vienna/Fairfax-GMU, a Washington Metro station.

The Fairfax County Public Schools are highly rated and widely known as one of the top school systems nationwide. It includes Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a Virginia Governor's School. In addition, there are many Catholic schools, George Mason University, and multiple campuses of Northern Virginia Community College. Inova Fairfax Hospital is well-known as one of the finest hospitals in the United States and has multiple campuses in the area.

### *Town of Vienna in Virginia*

Wesley UMC is in the Town of Vienna, a part of the Hunter Mill District of Fairfax County. The town has various local businesses, restaurants, and churches with a long history. Within a few miles, the church is accessible to various public systems, including highways, schools, hospitals, a metro station, a library, a post office, and a fire station. This is a nature-friendly community with many trails as well as small and large local and county parks nearby.

Wesley UMC has a two-story construction with a sanctuary (capacity 400), Fellowship Hall (capacity 288), over twenty classrooms, and two fenced playgrounds. It is located in a residential area of single-family houses, less than a mile distant from the center of the town. Many people walk dogs around the church, and many children in the neighborhood enjoy playing in the church's outdoor playgrounds or riding bicycles in the church parking lot. Most church members live within ten minutes of driving distance; some are less than a mile.

## Demographic Descriptions

### *Demographic Profile of Hunter Mill District, Fairfax County in Virginia*

The population of Fairfax County has continuously increased. In 2020, its population was 1,171,800 with 417,500 households. Both numbers are expected to grow over the next thirty years.<sup>8</sup> The population of the Town of Vienna also has continuously increased. In 2020, its population was 17,004.<sup>9</sup> The median age of Fairfax County residents was 25.2 years-old in 1970 and was 37.3 years-old in 2010.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, the county was predominantly white, but the distribution has become more diverse. The white population has decreased from 69.9% in 2000 to 59.8% in 2020. In 2020, the black population was 10.2%; the Asian and Pacific islander population was 19.9%; and other ethnic groups represented 10.1%.<sup>11</sup> Non-U.S. citizens comprised 31.3% in 2015 through 2019.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Xuemei Han and Fatima Khaja, *Demographic Reports 2020*, Economic, Demographic and Statistical Research, Department of Management and Budget, County of Fairfax, Virginia (March 2021), II-2, accessed November 3, 2021, Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, population 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010 Decennial Census; housing units and households 1970 and 1980 Decennial Census, <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/demographics/sites/demographics/files/assets/demographicreports/fullrpt.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Han and Khaja, *Demographic Reports 2020*, II-6, Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990, 2000 and 2010 Decennial Census; Fairfax County Department of Management and Budget, 1991 through 1999, 2001 through 2009, 2011 through 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Han and Khaja, *Demographic Reports 2020*, II-4, Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Decennial Census 1970 through 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Han and Khaja, *Demographic Reports 2020*, II-6, Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000 and 2010 Decennial Census; Fairfax County Department of Management and Budget, 2020 population; and Census Bureaus, 2019 American Community Survey (1-Year), percentages.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Quick Facts Fairfax County, Virginia*, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fairfaxcountyvirginia/POP645219#POP645219>.

Fairfax County reported a median household income of \$128,374 and a median family income of \$151,028 as of 2019.<sup>13</sup> In 2020, a single-family home in the Hunter Mill District, including the Town of Vienna, was estimated to cost \$835,181.<sup>14</sup> Of adults in the twenty-five years and older population of Fairfax County, 63.2% had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021; while 38.7% of the same age group in Virginia as a whole had a bachelor's or higher degree.<sup>15</sup> Of the employed population sixteen and over, 76.6% was white-collar and 23.4% was blue-collar in the county.<sup>16</sup> The percentage of poverty in the county was 6.0% in 2019.<sup>17</sup> A family of four would need over \$75,000 on average per year to meet their expenses. The unemployment rate in August 2020 was 6.0%, higher than the 2.5% unemployment rate in August 2019.<sup>18</sup>

### *Demographic Profile of Wesley UMC*

According to the 2021 statistics, Wesley UMC membership is 885. The congregation is predominantly Caucasian: 856 out of 885 (97%). Other ethnic groups are

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<sup>13</sup> Xuemei Han and Fatima Khaja, *Demographic Reports 2020*, II-7, Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census of Population and Housing, 1999; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001 Supplemental Survey; American Community Survey (1-Year), 2002-2019; and Fairfax County Department of Management and Budget, all other years.

<sup>14</sup> Han and Khaja, *Demographic Reports 2020*, VIII-4, Source: Fairfax County Department of Management and Budget, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> MissionInsite by ACS Technologies, *The ExecutiveInsite Report—Study Area: Fairfax County* (October 27, 2021), 11, Sources: US Census Bureau, Synergos Technologies Inc., Experian, DecisionInsite/MissionInsite.

<sup>16</sup> MissionInsite, *The ExecutiveInsite Report*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Fairfax County Community Action Advisory Board, *The State of the Poor Bookmark*, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/familyservices/sites/familyservices/files/assets/boardsauthoritiescommissions/community-action-advisory-board/pdfs/2020-community-action-advisory-board-state-of-the-poor-bookmark.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Fairfax County Community Action Advisory Board, *The State of the Poor Bookmark*.

Asian (16), Black (2), Hispanic/Latinx (5), and multiracial (6). Female members are 502 (57%); male members are 383 (43%).<sup>19</sup>

The congregation is highly educated, and its income level is considerably high. Most members own their single-family homes; some own a second home in another state. Many members are retired from the public school system, military, or government, and frequently travel abroad. Many members are professionals in government, law, IT, or various businesses. Several families are young, with children under eighteen years old. There are only a few unmarried young adults in the congregation. Most youths go to college in other parts of Virginia or another state while their family continues attending Wesley UMC. Full online worship has been offered since the coronavirus outbreak, both live-streamed and recorded. Average attendance at weekly worship services in 2021 was recorded as 171: 56 at in-person services and 115 at online services.<sup>20</sup> In-person and virtual participation in worship and small groups on Sunday is currently estimated at between 100 and 125.

## **The Present Ministry**

### *Lack of Listening Space in Ministry*

Reviewing various processes and decision-making procedures, Wesley UMC's leaders have difficulty listening to others' voices and reflecting them in ministry. Leaders

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<sup>19</sup> Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church Statistics—Equipping Vital Congregation, *Statistics Report 2021 471508 Wesley UMC* (Glen Allen, VA: Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church, 2022), 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church Statistics—Equipping Vital Congregation, *Statistics Report 2021 471508 Wesley UMC*, 3.

have no formal mechanism for listening to each other's voices and needs. This is shown in the congregational tendency to considerably rely on pastoral leadership. The last two pastoral leaders served from 2005 to 2016 and from 2016 to 2022, respectively. The pastors led many major moving-forward efforts without sufficient discussion, communication, and cooperation with the lay leadership. The congregation did not recognize what was not done or processed properly as there were insufficient opportunities to share their voices and opinions for the future of the church.

The pastor who served between 2005 and 2016 created a full-time associate pastor position despite the resistance of some lay leadership due to the expected financial challenge. The fund was made from the church's reserved fund for two years. During the other pastor's ministry between 2016 and 2022, the pastor participated in the SHIFT Plus program, a ministry revitalizing process led by the district in 2019 and 2020. In February 2020, he formed the Vision Operation Team, composed of six lay members and the pastor. The Team met virtually every other week during the pandemic, beginning in March 2020, and presented a new church vision in September 2020.<sup>21</sup> During his ministry, as part of the vision process, Simplified, Accountable Structure (SAS, a one-board model) was presented and approved at the 2021 Charge Conference on November 14, 2021. He planned to launch in the fall of 2022. However, it was not implemented because he received a new appointment in February, effective as of July 1, 2022.

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<sup>21</sup> Connie Berger, "2019/2020 State of the Church Report," *The 2020 Charge Conference* (Vienna, VA: Wesley United Methodist Church, 2020), 2; Kyungsuk Cho, "2020 Pastor's Annual Report," "2019/2020 State of the Church Report," *The 2020 Charge Conference* (Vienna, VA: Wesley United Methodist Church, 2020), 4; "Church Leadership 2021 Nominations and Leadership Development Committee Report," *The 2020 Charge Conference* (Vienna, VA: Wesley United Methodist Church, 2020), 8.



Due to the transition to the new structure, the basic required committees by *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* were not fully nominated in 2021. It caused a lack of strong lay leadership. Implementing SAS, including nominations, became the task of the successor. When I, the newly appointed pastor, began my ministry at Wesley UMC, I saw various signs of a lack of communication between the predecessor and the lay leaders. Even the Vision Operation Team members, the Lay Leader, and the Church Council chairperson expressed concerns about the process and its structure. The lay leadership had no full and clear understanding of the structure and operations under the new structure. Their concerns were not shared, and their voices were not heard in the structural transitioning process.

The lay leadership has respected and fully supported pastoral leadership. From the beginning, the leadership has been reluctant to share their honest opinions and feelings with the pastor. This atmosphere has led the leadership to follow the pastor's decisions, opinions, and preferences over the years with full respect for pastoral leadership. When the ministry is established all around a pastor, the church has no space and opportunity to share and listen to each other's voices. The congregation's various needs are not cared for and embraced in ministry. Different voices are easily ignored and unwelcome.

Wesley UMC's lay leaders tend to look for answers from the pastor. The pandemic outbreak made them more dependent on the pastor's gifts, such as worship recording and video editing. It also reduced interactive chances between the pastor and the congregation to share and listen to each other's voices and limited social contacts and space. When the two new congregations joined the church in 2019 and 2020, respectively, the lack of communication caused another issue of transparency. There was

no open space to listen to each congregation's stories and embrace different needs in one combined community.

Actively serving leaders passed away in recent years. Many long-time faithful members are aged and rigid about changes, new ideas, and initiatives. A particular group occasionally expresses high resistance to listening to different opinions. Most leaders play multiple roles in the congregation. Volunteers' burnout has been frequently mentioned as an issue in the ministry. Younger generations are not trained as future leaders of the church. They are reluctant to make a commitment to the ministry. These internal and external factors do not allow the church to create a listening space in ministry.

#### *Weak Prayer Culture in Ministry*

Wesley UMC had no prayer group that met regularly until I initiated with lay leaders in the fall of 2022. Sunday bulletin includes a prayer list for individuals, but this seems more like a list than an active prayer life in the congregation. Every Sunday, the power of prayer is emphasized at the worship service, and prayer cards are available for worshipers to share their joys and concerns. Yet, it is barely used by the congregation. Only a few members have shared their personal prayer requests with me. It is hard to see the signs of the culture of prayer in the congregation and the ministries of the church, except for the Prayer Quilt Ministry.

In 2019, the predecessor encouraged the congregation to join in a daily prayer every morning or night at 8:45, wherever they were. The Lay Leader reported, "This practice of daily prayer has blossomed and has instilled a culture of prayer in Wesley's

congregation and families.”<sup>22</sup> This encouragement to prayer was included in the Sunday bulletin and weekly email communications for over three years. There was no actual meeting where the congregation met and prayed together. In September 2022, I, as the new pastor, invited lay leaders and led a two-week-long daily prayer meeting in a virtual format. Seven leaders participated in the daily prayer more than once. Among them, a member joined in the circle of prayer every night except for one time. On September 29, 2022, I again invited the lay leaders to a virtual weekly prayer meeting to pray for the next seven weeks until the upcoming annual Charge Conference.

### **Ministry Journey: Growing as a Called Servant**

#### *Growing as a Child of God*

I was born and raised in the Republic of Korea, often called South Korea. I majored in theology, with a second major in social work at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea. College life opened my eyes through personal, social, and communal experiences. In my senior year, I was privileged to serve as the President of the Student Council in the College of Theology. I learned more about my own strengths and weaknesses as a person and a leader. I discovered that I enjoyed institutional structures—working in a team, supporting others, developing programs, creating events, and building up structures with my administrative and relational skills. Regular chapel opportunities at school enabled me to hear different religious viewpoints and social topics from

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<sup>22</sup> Connie Berger, “2019/2020 State of the Church Report,” 2.

professors, alumni, pastors, and other professionals, and broadened my perspective to see people, society, and religion.

During the summer of 2007, I had an opportunity to join a worship and music internship, designed by a professor of worship in my college and a United Methodist pastor in the New York Conference. As part of the internship, I served at a Presbyterian retreat center and a Presbyterian church in New York. I learned and experienced more about various worship styles, including Taizé, liturgical dance, and traditional liturgy. I experienced indescribable freedom and peace in the newness of worship and music. The Korean worship style I grew up with was modernized and strongly emphasized speaking tongues and *Tongsung Kido*—a unique Korean prayer style, literally meaning “crying out with a loud voice.” I always felt awkward when listening to and observing others speaking tongues and praying aloud at home and church. In Korean culture, I paid attention to others’ judgmental eyes because of my personal experiences and social atmosphere. Even in worship, I used to think about others instead of focusing on God. The internship experience allowed me to experience new ways to experience God, open myself more to different styles of worship, and see a bigger God beyond the Korean Christian culture.

Two years later, in 2009, I, as an international student, came to the United States and entered Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. to study for a Master of Divinity degree. My worship experiences became more varied thanks to those who came from different backgrounds and cultures: Japan, Germany, Ghana, and other parts of Korea and the United States. I found joy in attending and exploring different worship styles and learning more about visual liturgical elements, worship traditions and music. In

worship, my language was no longer a challenge. My experience about God became much deeper and broader as the wall in my narrow mind collapsed through a variety of experiences in worship and culture. Chesterbrook UMC in McLean, Virginia, also helped me to learn traditional worship style and liturgy, intercessory prayer, labyrinth, and prayer beads. My introverted personality became a great gift to practice Lectio Divina, contemplative prayer, and labyrinth, in a better-structured pattern of holiness.

Language was still a challenge for me. However, over the years, the power of silence gradually drew me closer to God and led me to develop my identity as a child of God. I realized the joy in being silent became a gift for my personal spiritual growth and listening more than speaking. Living as a non-native English speaker led me to be more patient and listen before responding to problematic issues. When I became silent and let God move first, I began to practice empathetic listening and exercise prudence in my choice of words.

### *Growing as a Called Servant of God*

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15, NIV).” I began to hold this Scripture as my ministry vision while I was in college. All the years of ministry have led me to know and understand myself on a deeper level and have expanded my identity from a child of God to a called servant of God. The reason God called me to the United States is not to be a fluent English speaker but to serve God’s people in this country and to help them know more about God’s love toward them. All the ministry experiences truly taught me the real meaning of pastoral presence beyond my language, ethnicity, and culture. This teaching was related to God’s ever-presence in

my life. Being physically isolated from familiar culture and distanced from family and long-time friends led me to find God more closely than ever before and strengthened my faith in God and God's calling.

Through numerous funeral services in my first years of ministry, I realized my pastoral role and power—the power of the promise of eternal life at a time when it was the most needed in others' lives. In October 2016, I faced the first death of a teenager and had to provide pastoral care and support for a family in deep pain. When I was speechless and could only weep, the mother of the deceased led me to realize what they really needed at that moment was not knowledge and eloquent speech but rather a true presence with an empathetic heart. Since then, I have been in many situations of supporting a family at the death of their young child. The youngest was a five-year-old child, found dead in a car. In another case, a girl in her early twenties took her own life at home with a gun.

Now I know that when I become silent and speechless, God speaks through me and reveals God-self through my presence. What I have to do is to listen to the voice of God quietly. Therefore, I am no longer anxious to find the right words in a desperate situation. Instead, I am fully present to listen to their stories and pain, remind them of God's presence through my pastoral presence, and pray for those who are mourning. I do not doubt that God uses me as a channel of God's empathetic presence in their lives, as I sincerely feel for them and share their tears and pain.

One of the most powerful and practical lessons I learned about prayer is from one of the senior pastors I served with. He has always prayed for me after a conversation or phone call since the first time I talked to him over the phone. For the past nine years since

I have known him, he has never missed praying for me when I talk to him on the phone or meet him. He truly cares for me, remembers what I shared with him before, and prays for all those whom I care for as well. His sincere prayer and pastoral presence have taught me to experience spiritual life intimately. His practice of prayer has been a great spiritual teaching for me. I open and close meetings with prayer not out of a habit, but from a full heart, pouring prayer as he has done for me. My language will never be perfect like a native-English speaker. However, I am convinced that God is revealed through my prayer and presence, as God is beyond a certain language and does not hear language but the heart of prayer. I believe that God uses all my inhales, exhales, and pauses in my verbal prayer and wholly fills any spacious and verbal emptiness through the Spirit.

### *Growing Beyond Language and Ethnicity*

My sermons have a unique perspective because of my background and identity as a young Korean clergywoman with no spouse and children. I am a minority in several social categories. My social status strengthens my interactions with socially and physically marginalized individuals, and I include them in my sermons and ministry. Vulnerability is one of my strengths in ministry. I often include my personal and confessional stories that people can see themselves in. An empathetic heart is often revealed on special days or seasons, such as Mother's Day and Christmas, because those days are not always happy for everyone. My extra efforts to recognize the isolated are appreciated by the congregation. That is because they can also be more sensitive and inclusive in different matters and attentive to listening to those whose voices are not often

heard. I believe this is a part of God's transformative work. God's work is not limited to a certain group of people, but all of God's children, regardless of social standards.

My gift of music and interest in worship design motivates me to lead different types of worship and prayer meetings. I designed and led a Tenebrae Service on Good Friday at one of the churches I previously served. It was also the first time this congregation experienced the service and Taizé music. I also designed a service of hope and healing and delivered a message on the longest night of the year for the first time at another church that I previously served. I am also interested in altar decoration and art in worship. I often add different elements, such as fabrics of different colors and textures, stones, and candles, to inspire others to find God's presence in a worship or prayer setting. Once when I finished a short-term Bible Study, I gave all the participants stones with hand-drawn labyrinths that I made while praying for them. Some participants still mention the labyrinth stone and how they have used it in their daily lives.

I sing and play the piano or guitar when I lead a special prayer service or devotion. In addition to learning and worship experiences, all the musical opportunities have led me to come closer to God and others by worshipping and sharing the joy of music together beyond any language barrier. Communicating through music taught me about God, who is not limited by our human language or any written or spoken forms. Through music, I experience God's universal presence beyond any specific language. As silence is also part of music, I began to enjoy my alone time and silence more than before because it creates a space for me to communicate with God and leaves room for God to speak to me and work ahead of me.



I have also practiced daily centering prayer in a virtual group setting for four years. In 2018, Korean clergywomen in the Virginia Annual Conference of the UMC began to meet periodically for group spiritual direction and centering prayer. In March 2020, it became a group of five members who met virtually and prayed together at 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday for twenty minutes of centering prayer. The virtual prayer group has continued and expanded to seven clergywomen of the conference. The daily practice of silent prayer has become a strong spiritual foundation for me, as I have received practical and spiritual support from other clergywomen, and my prayer routine has been more strongly established.

### **Synergy: Growing as a Church of God**

#### *Time to Listen as a Church of God*

Wesley UMC's leadership has difficulty listening to others' voices and embracing others' needs in the ministry and community. As much of the leadership wants to keep longtime traditional methods and perspectives, there is no open space for the leaders to listen to a new or different voice in the body of the church. As a United Methodist Church, Wesley UMC has regular transitions of pastoral leadership, leading to different focuses and emphasis of the ministry, depending on the gifts and strengths of new pastoral leadership. Change is a part of human life and the cycle of church ministry. Without listening to the congregation's diverse voices and creating a space to listen to them, this nature of life and church can always shake the foundation of ministry and

change the congregation's identity. Lack of listening space causes the leadership not to embrace the whole congregation by only partially representing the congregation.

All local churches of the UMC are still feeling the impacts of the global pandemic and the issues to be addressed by the General Conference. These two ongoing issues constantly distract each local church's ministry focus and drain excessive time and energy from clergy, laity, and denomination. To some degree, Wesley UMC has also been affected by those external factors, and the church must deal with the issues over the next few months and years. This situation requires another reason for all individuals and the church to listen to various opinions, thoughts, and feelings and to sustain as a church of God, regardless of whether all voices are acceptable or not, for a mutual agreement.

I believe that if lay leaders learn and practice listening prayer in their lives, they can lead an empathetic ministry by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in ministry. With our human efforts and God's help, Wesley UMC can listen to each other and embrace various needs in different parts of the mission and ministry. Church members will have an experience of being heard, included, and embraced in their church's ministry and future, regardless of age, culture, background, or physical mobility. The experience of being heard will enable more people to feel included, welcomed, and accepted in their church and ministry development. The center of the ministry will be switched from a pastor or lay leadership to the entire congregation, as Jesus' earthly ministry showed, and his voice proclaimed the inclusive work of God.

The church needs spiritual lay leaders to lead the church by listening to others rather than depending on selected people's professional knowledge, skills, and experiences. Spiritual lay leadership knows how to include those who are not typically

invited, as Jesus on the marginalized side heard, served, and included the weak, isolated, and powerless in the ministry of God. Listening prayer can enable leaders to learn how to embrace various voices and needs in ministry.

### *Becoming Listening Leadership and Empathetic Church*

The project invited lay leaders to a seven-week training through an act of listening prayer to grow as empathetic spiritual leaders who know how to listen to God and others' voices and embrace them into ministry. The project was designed for a small group of six to nine church members who are serving in leadership roles. The selected invitation aimed to train leaders to learn about the need and power of listening prayer and create a culture of listening prayer among the leaders so that it can ultimately expand to the entire congregation.

All the participants were encouraged to have a time of listening prayer each day in their lives during the entire project. In a weekly group meeting, the participants learned about listening prayer based on biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary foundations and practiced listening prayer as a group. A weekly group meeting also included a time for reflection, when the participants freely shared their personal feelings and stories from their prayer life, as the small group provided spiritual support.

Considering the nature of the project, qualitative measures were used to analyze and evaluate the results of the project. Before the project, a written survey was held to examine each participant's prayer life and understanding of prayer. Narratives in a private or group conversation were the primary method, and both writing and verbal forms were used. The expected fruits of the project were learning the need to listen,

practicing listening prayer, and growing empathetic spiritual leaders. At the conclusion of the project, the written self-survey was completed so the participants could examine their learning throughout the project from actual sessions and daily prayer.

The project was expected to allow the leaders of the church to learn and practice listening prayer through group study, discussion, reflection, and their own experiences of listening prayer. When the participants learn and practice listening prayer, they will learn the significance of listening prayer as a leader and the church to embrace various voices and needs of the congregation into ministry. Their learning and experience of listening prayer will change their focus and interest from a pastor, leadership, or a program to the entire congregation and grow them as empathetic spiritual leaders, who listen to and embrace different voices and needs in overall ministry.

### **Conclusion**

Wesley UMC's history and present ministry show insufficient listening space in the ministry. Talented, devoted, and gifted pastors led great successes in many areas. However, at the same time, the ministry has built a tendency to listen to and rely on only selected leaders' voices, including the pastor. The tendency did not create enough space for lay leaders to grow as empathetic spiritual leaders who listen to God and others' voices and include various needs and requests in ministry development. Leadership was greatly affected by significant changes in recent years—welcoming two small congregations into the church body, the pandemic, the visioning process, the transitioning process to the one-board model, and pastoral change. New and various voices were not

heard by leadership, and important decisions and plans were made only by a handful of congregational representatives.

As a result, many voices and needs in the ministry were neglected, and a considerable number of people were not invited to a place where their voices could be shared and reflected in the ministry. Lay leadership could not represent the entire congregation. Its influence weakened, and many positions were eliminated or not filled on purpose. This resulted in missing unspoken and small voices for the future of the church, which had to be asked and valued.

It is a time to listen to the entire voice of the congregation and become a church for all, not only for those whose voices have the power to make decisions. A strong culture of listening prayer will significantly help the leadership to embrace the voice of the congregation attentively. I believe that if lay leaders learn and practice listening prayer in their daily lives, it will enable them to be empathetic by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in the ministry. A daily practice of listening prayer will enable lay leadership to establish a channel to listen to and include various voices of the congregation for the church. Although it is unlikely that everyone in a group will unanimously agree on every issue, the experience of being heard will certainly make a difference in the congregation. When the church must handle the matter of the General Conference and its aftermath in the next few months and years, as well as when the church must deal with various changes and conflicts in the life of the church, empathetic listening leaders will provide the power to represent the voice of the church, not the voice of leaders, and embrace various voices.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS**

1 Kings 17:8-16 is one of the well-known miracles in the Hebrew Testament and is usually called the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. As the name of the story implies, Elijah and a widow are the central figures. The social status of the woman and the geographic location give us more background. Although they did not share many common traits, they interacted with each other and experienced God's miraculous provision through each other. The story also shows the widow's respect for Elijah's ethnic and religious background and Elijah's empathetic heart through his recognition of the widow's desperation.

Elijah's leadership style is not only prophetic but empathetic and spiritual in the passage. Elijah's leadership is a great example of healthy and spiritual leadership that any faith community can aspire to learn and adapt to and leaders should strive to follow regardless of each role, responsibility, background, and gifts. This viewpoint is supported by other stories and the mention of Elijah in the Bible.

Elijah in the chosen Scripture testifies that the fruit of prayer is a revelation of God's empathy through individual leaders and faith communities. Elijah in 1 Kings 17:8-16 proves the powerful influence of prayerful leadership on his own life and others' lives. The power comes from a leader's empathetic heart, which is only possible through

constant prayer that allows one to recognize others' pain and suffering and have tender insights into God's heart toward us and others.

This chapter includes the historical background, literature, purpose, and structure of the books of the Kings, with particular attention to the biblical exegesis of 1 Kings 17:8-16. The chapter examines Elijah's identity from three different aspects: (1) a person of God, (2) a person of prayer, and (3) a person of empathy. This approach supports the need and power of empathetic leadership in faith communities through listening prayer.

### *Historical Background*

The books of Kings reveal God's active work in the history of Israel, particularly following the royal kingship from David's death in 962 BCE (1 Kings 2:10) until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.<sup>1</sup> This period includes the splitting of the kingdom into two—Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom)—and the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.<sup>2</sup> During the history of over four hundred years from the tenth century to the sixth century BCE, the monarchy and divided kingdom underwent numerous political crises, domestic wars, international conflicts, and apostasies toward YHWH. The books of the Kings describe prophets' significant role in ensuring the kings' covenantal relationships with God. Their confrontation with apostate kings and various narratives compose a

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, vol. 8, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 1; Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 287.

<sup>2</sup> Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 287.

substantial portion of the books, such as Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17-2 Kings 8) and Isaiah under the Assyrian's influence (2 Kings 18-21).<sup>3</sup>

### *Literature and Purpose*

The books of First and Second Kings are typically classified as historical books of the Hebrew Testament. The timeline is considered a norm, but it is somewhat challenging to ascertain its factuality because this was not originally written as a historical record in our modern understanding.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of the books is more than a historical documentation because it describes the will and nature of God through various historical events and stories.<sup>5</sup> The history in the books was intentionally selected and formed only to tell the work of God's will.<sup>6</sup> The whole story in the books witnesses God's sovereignty and divine intervention into the seemingly chaotic history of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann regards the text as more of "an interpretive commentary" of the royal history or "a theology of history" to

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<sup>3</sup> August H. Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Choon-Leong Seow, "The First and Second Books of Kings," in *1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Tobit, Judith*, vol. III, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. ed. Linda S. Allen (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Seow, "The First and Second Books of Kings," 3.



understand and reveal YHWH, Israelite God.<sup>8</sup> Choon-Leong Seow also addresses that “the purpose of the book of Kings is to impart a theological message.”<sup>9</sup>

This viewpoint led the Jewish order to include the books of Kings as part of the “First Prophets,” not as history in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup> Modern scholars think that the Book of Deuteronomy influenced the books of Kings because of its substantial resemblance in vocabulary, literature, and theological viewpoint. Due to repeated redaction over several centuries from the eighth century to the sixth century, however, it seems complicated to assert the final form as the Deuteronomic History despite coherence.<sup>11</sup>

### *Structure*

The books of First Kings and Second Kings may be divided into three sections: (1) 1 Kings 1-11, (2) 1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17, and (3) 2 Kings 18-25. The first part primarily concerns the kingship of Solomon and its era, including the Temple in Jerusalem. The second part focuses on various kings’ apostasy toward God in the divided kingdom and the northern kingdom’s destruction due to disobedience to God. The third part is about the kingdom of Judah—reformatory efforts and its destruction.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Seow, “The First and Second Books of Kings,” 7.

<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 2; Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, *The Anchor Bible* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 84.

<sup>11</sup> Seow, “The First and Second Books of Kings,” 4.

<sup>12</sup> Seow, “The First and Second Books of Kings,” 4-5.

## Biblical Exegesis of 1 Kings 17:8-16

### *Outline of 1 Kings 17:8-16*

1 Kings 17:8-16 is the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. It is the Bible's second episode about Elijah. The section highlights his personal interaction with the widow in a foreign setting and God's provision for them through each other. The structure of the passage can be understood as follows:

1. God's commandment to Elijah (17:8-9)
2. Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (17:10-16)
  - a. Elijah's obedience and interaction with the widow (17:10-12)
  - b. Elijah's empathetic presence and continued faithfulness (17:13-14)
  - c. The widow's obedience and the fulfillment of Elijah's prophecy (17:15-16)

### *Contextual Background of 1 Kings 17:8-16*

The background of the chosen Scripture is during the reign of Ahab in the northern kingdom. Ahab, son of Omri, ruled the kingdom for twenty-two years (1 Kings 16:29), following Omri, his father, who was a representative model of a strong and influential king in Israel's history.<sup>13</sup> The Bible recorded that Ahab's evilness was more than any preceding king's (16:30). He married the Phoenician woman, Jezebel (16:31), worshipped the Canaanite god Baal (16:31), and built an altar and temple for Baal

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<sup>13</sup> Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, 21.

(16:32) and an Asherah pole (16:33). The anger of God was escalated by his unfaithfulness and disobedience (16:33).

Before the chosen Scripture, Elijah appeared to Ahab and Jezebel and delivered them the Word of God about drought. Elijah courageously declared to Ahab that there would be no rain without his words (17:1). The declaration of no rain was a direct attack against Baal, the god of rain, fertility, and productivity in Canaanite/Phoenician polytheistic culture.<sup>14</sup> Following the word of the Lord (scripturally) and avoiding the king's wrath (possibly according to 18:7-10, 17), Elijah fled to the Wadi Cherith, east of the Jordan (17:3), and he experienced God's miraculous provision through the ravens that brought bread and meat each morning and evening (17:2-6). However, as we can infer from the fact that the location's name means "cut off creek," the creek dried up after a while (17:7).<sup>15</sup> Again, the word of the Lord led Elijah to Zarephath of Sidon, where the story from the selected passage happened, and God's second provision would take place for Elijah, the obedient servant.

#### *Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath*

When the Wadi dried up, God ordered Elijah to go to Zarephath (17:8-9a). Zarephath was a town in Phoenician territory, outside the north of Israel, that Ahab's influence could not reach. The town was on the Mediterranean coast between Sidon and Tyre, being located about seven miles south of Sidon, which was Jezebel's home area

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<sup>14</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary, The Old Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 209.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome T. Walsh, *I Kings, Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 228.

(16:31).<sup>16</sup> God said to Elijah, “I have ordered a certain widow there to feed you.”<sup>17</sup> As her identity explains, the nameless woman already went through the loss of her husband and suffered from his absence—lack of protection. A widow could not sustain her own life without social support and communal care for a living. For these reasons, the Torah secured lawful protection for widows, along with orphans and aliens.<sup>18</sup> In addition, many days and years of famine must have crippled her livelihood even more. Therefore, Elijah could anticipate God’s miraculous provision through the widow even before he met the widow.<sup>19</sup>

As the Word of God said, Elijah met a woman at the town gate (17:10), and he likely recognized her, the widow, whom God would use to feed him, because she was wearing a widow’s mourning clothes (Gen. 38:14).<sup>20</sup> She was gathering straws, twigs, and branches.<sup>21</sup> First, Elijah politely asked her for “a little water (17:10).” When she was about to comply, he asked for an extra favor for “a morsel of bread (17:11).”<sup>22</sup> Unlike the imperative sentences of the translation in English, the original Hebrew text of this scene shows his modesty in his request for water and food.<sup>23</sup> She made an oath, starting “as the LORD your God lives (17:12a),” and explained her almost empty hands. Her immediate

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<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 210; Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, 296; Walsh, *1 Kings*, 228-29.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Kings 17:9b, New Revised Standard Version. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the NRSV.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 210.

<sup>19</sup> Cogan, *1 Kings*, 427.

<sup>20</sup> Cogan, *1 Kings*, 427.

<sup>21</sup> Cogan, *1 Kings*, 427.

<sup>22</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 229.

<sup>23</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 227.

response to provide water to Elijah turned to a refusal when she was asked for more because of her and her son's starvation caused by the serious drought (17:12).

In her response, the widow surprisingly mentioned YHWH as Elijah's God (17:12).<sup>24</sup> Elijah was a foreigner in Zarephath, and the people of Zarephath in Sidon did not believe in YHWH. Sidon was Jezebel's home territory (16:31) and had a polytheistic culture with Baal as the source of fertility and control of nature.<sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly, the widow believed in other gods in her culture. The widow's mention of Elijah's god in verse 12 indicates the religious and cultural differences between Elijah and the widow. It also shows that the widow observantly recognized Elijah's identity as an Israelite either by his clothes or speech and respected his ethnic and religious background.<sup>26</sup> The context also reveals their different social status as a man and woman and Elijah's minor status in the region. The widow's socioeconomic status and contextual condition were sufficient for her to doubt her god, Baal, who was believed to maintain life and provide food and water.<sup>27</sup>

The widow explained her desperation that she had nothing to bake, only "a handful of meal" and "a little oil (17:12)." She was gathering sticks so that she may prepare for a meal and die with her son (17:12). The amount of food and water she had was precisely the amount of Elijah's request—"a little water" and "a morsel of bread (17:10b-11)."<sup>28</sup> Elijah asked her for all she had. Her situation preparing for the last meal

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<sup>24</sup> Cogan, *I Kings*, 428.

<sup>25</sup> Brueggemann, *I & 2 Kings*, 210; Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Walsh, *I Kings*, 229.

<sup>27</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Walsh, *I Kings*, 229.

with her son shows that she had no social assistance. This also demonstrates Baal's incapability to overcome famine.<sup>29</sup>

Elijah said to the widow, "Do not be afraid (17:13)." "Do not be afraid" was his first response to the woman's concern about insufficient food and a starving son. After recognizing her fear and worries, Elijah ordered the widow to provide him with a little bread and water first and then make something for herself and her son (17:13). He also declared that she would not experience an empty jar of meal and jug of oil until Israel's God sent rain (17:14). Elijah comforted her by proclaiming the truth that YHWH, Israel's God, is the true source of life—flour, oil, and rain—for the widow and her son (17:14), not her god, Baal. When the widow listened to and followed Elijah's word, the flour jar and the oil flask did not run out for Elijah, the widow, and her family for many days (17:15-16a). This is just exactly what YHWH promised to Elijah (17:16b).

The passage proves the omnipotent deity of YHWH, Israel's God, because God brought drought outside of Israel's territory, which was considered outside of YHWH's influence on some groups of people.<sup>30</sup> It also shows that God's work is not limited to a certain ethnic group and its territory, and it crosses ethnic, national, cultural, regional, and religious boundaries. In other words, God's work is universal in its intention and impact. It is unlimited in its scope and subject. In 1 Kings 17, God uses every component—rain, ravens, and a widow—of God's creation. Likewise, nature, animals, and all human beings are in God's total control to fulfill God's will and reveal God's almighty power in

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<sup>29</sup> Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, 296.

<sup>30</sup> Cogan, *1 Kings*, 432.

the universe. 1 Kings 17 also shows that the power of life is not in the ruling royal authority but in God, the real giver of life.<sup>31</sup>

The widow's presence and role in the story also reaffirm YHWH's care for non-Israelites. In particular, it is worth noting how the passage highlights God's use of a widow as God's instrument and God's reward to her submission to Elijah's word and God's provision.<sup>32</sup> God used a powerless and disadvantaged social minority to make the divine provision for God's work. It confirms that social hierarchies and religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, have no power to hinder God from God's immense power and lifegiving providence.

### **Elijah's Identity**

The main figure of the chosen Scripture is Elijah. He is found in 1 Kings 17-19, 21, and 2 Kings 1-2. He is a symbolic figure of prophecy and one of the most well-known prophets in the Hebrew Testament. His appearance unfolded suddenly in the history of Israel without any particular connection to the previous stories. The Bible does not provide much information about his early days, except that he is the Tishbite in Gilead (17:1).<sup>33</sup> Gilead is an eastern region of the Jordan River, which belongs to the Israelites' territory but was distanced from its central power.<sup>34</sup> The exact location of Tishbe is not

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<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 218.

<sup>32</sup> Cogan, *1 Kings*, 432.

<sup>33</sup> Russell H. Dilday, *1, 2 Kings*, Old Testament vol. 9, *The Communicator's Commentary Series* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 202.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2005), 272.

identified other than being in the vicinity of Gilead.<sup>35</sup> In modern English translation, it is unclear whether “Tishbite” implies his origin or social status, meaning it remains uncertain whether he is a native or an immigrant of the region. That is because “Tishbe in Gilead” more likely means “one of the settlers in Gilead” in the original Hebrew text.<sup>36</sup>

Elijah was recognized as the new Moses in Israel’s history partly because of noticeable parallels between Moses’ life and his. Both spent forty days and nights in the wilderness; Moses at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:18) and Elijah at Mt. Horeb (1 Kings 19:8).<sup>37</sup> Both Moses and Elijah parted and crossed the waters, the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21-22) and the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8), respectively.<sup>38</sup> Both experienced God’s miraculous daily provision through manna and quail from heaven (Exod. 16) or bread and meat by ravens (1 Kings 17:2-6). Elijah’s succession to Elisha is also similar to Moses’s succession to Joshua (1 Kings 19:19-21; Num. 27:18-23).<sup>39</sup>

In addition, Elijah had an unusual end to his life. Elijah ascended to heaven on chariots of fire (2 Kings 2:11-12). His ascension took place where Moses died (2 Kings 2:8; Deut. 34:1).<sup>40</sup> The last part of the Hebrew Testament shows the Israelites’ expectation of Elijah’s return before the day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5). In the New Testament, Jewish leaders questioned the identity of John the Baptist—whether he was the returned Elijah or promised Messiah (John 1:20-22, 25). Moses is understood as the

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<sup>35</sup> Dilday, *I, 2 Kings*, 202; Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 211; Walsh, *I Kings*, 226.

<sup>36</sup> Walsh, *I Kings*, 225-26.

<sup>37</sup> Brueggemann, *I & 2 Kings*, 240.

<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann, *I & 2 Kings*, 294.

<sup>39</sup> Konkel, *I & 2 Kings*, 383.

<sup>40</sup> Konkel, *I & 2 Kings*, 383.



symbol of the Law (Torah), while Elijah was seen as the symbol of prophecy in the Hebrew Testament. In the scene of Jesus' ascension at Mount of Transfiguration, Elijah appeared with Moses and talked with Jesus (Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). Elijah is undoubtedly a significant figure who intertwines different eras throughout the entirety of Israel's history and finally links the history to Jesus' ministry.

### *Elijah: A Person of God*

Elijah's name is made up of two names for God: Elohim and Yahweh (or Jehovah).<sup>41</sup> His name literally means "Yah(weh) is my god (el)."<sup>42</sup> 1 Kings 17:8-16 clearly shows Elijah's identity as a person of God.

Before the chosen Scripture, Elijah showed his obedience by immediately following God's Word (1 Kings 17:3-5). By doing so, he put himself at risk—distanced from his familiar life with normal support systems.<sup>43</sup> In the Scripture, Elijah fed a Sidonian widow and her son with nothing (17:8-16), just like God saved him from life-threatening danger from Ahab and miraculously provided him with bread and meat through ravens (17:2-7). Food the widow had was originally planned for her last meal with her son, but when the widow faithfully listened and obeyed Elijah, they had enough every day for Elijah and her household (17:12, 15-16). This is a repeated provision by God for Elijah: when Elijah obeyed the Word of God, God fed him each day. God's provision was also for the woman and son through Elijah, a person of God. Elijah, who

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<sup>41</sup> Dilday, *1, 2 Kings*, 202.

<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 207.

<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 209.

experienced God's provision in desperation, became a channel to reveal God's provision to the widow in the same situation.

In the following story, Elijah raised the widow's dead son (17:17-24); the widow called out Elijah "man of God" while resenting her guilt and blaming Elijah for the reason for her son's death. Her call shows her expectation toward Elijah, who could fulfill the role of 'a man of God,' including healing and saving her son's life.<sup>44</sup> Later, the Sidonian widow confessed to him, "You are a man of God, that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth (17:24)."

#### *Elijah: A Person of Prayer*

N. Graham Standish defines prayer as "the air we breathe that allows us to discern God's purpose, become open to God's presence, and become alive to God's power," as he emphasizes prayerful leadership.<sup>45</sup> In Christian history, Elijah has been considered a powerful example of a prayerful prophet, who knows and experiences God's almighty power. His life showed and followed every aspect of Standish's definition of prayer.

1 Kings 17:8-16 does not include Elijah's spoken prayer. Yet, it shows that Elijah listened to the Word of God, followed it, and prophesized it to the widow. His prayer-centered life is found in other stories. He believed in the living God, who listened to his cries and supplication. He cried out to God for the widow's dead child, and his sincere prayer raised the child from the dead (17:20-22). His prayer is also found in 1 Kings

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<sup>44</sup> Amy Kalmanofsky, "Women of God: Maternal Grief and Religious Response in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36.1 (2011): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089211419422>.

<sup>45</sup> N. Graham Standish, *Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 87.

18:36-37 and 19:4. His prayer brought the fire of the Lord (18:38). He called a heavy rain after three and a half years of drought (18:45). When he fled to the wilderness to avoid a life-threatening situation caused by Ahab and Jezebel, God listened to his prayer and provided him bread and water (19:1-6).

Elijah is also mentioned as an example of the faithful and righteous. The author of James, for example, praises Elijah as a figure who manifested the great power of a righteous person as he emphasizes prayerful life (James 5:16c).

Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest (5:17-18).

Inarguably, Elijah is a symbolic figure as a prophet in the Hebrew Testament. Therefore, readers of the Letter of James must have regarded Elijah as a special person of God who is different from themselves—ordinary people. Unlike the general understanding, the author of James describes him as “a human being like us (James 5:17).” Its literal meaning in Greek is “of like feeling.”<sup>46</sup> Elijah’s humanity enables the readers to link themselves closely to Elijah, who was just like them. By removing a gap between the prophet Elijah and his readers, James teaches that God hears and responds to their prayers as God did to Elijah’s prayers.<sup>47</sup> Elijah’s prayer was powerful not because of his status as a prophet but because of his righteousness. The power of prayer is not only given to prophets in history but to those who pray to God.

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<sup>46</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Letter of James,” in *Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude, Revelation*, vol. XII, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Linda S. Allen (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 223.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, “The Letter of James,” 223.

James clearly emphasizes that a righteous person's prayer has power (5:16c). The righteous (*dikaioi*) reflect on the Torah's tradition for those who turn to YHWH.<sup>48</sup> Prayer is not a privilege of a specific group of people, such as ministers and prophets. One person's prayers are not more powerful than another's. God neither judges nor devalues someone's prayer because of their socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic background. Anyone can pray and experience the power of prayer just like Elijah.

### *Elijah: A Person of Empathy*

According to Oxford English Dictionary, empathy is "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation."<sup>49</sup> In addition, we use the term empathy broadly to include another person or group's thoughts, perspectives, and feelings. Elijah serves as an excellent example of an empathetic person in the chosen Scripture. The story does not describe Elijah as someone with a typical and traditional leadership style, such as a strong and charismatic man. He was neither a king nor an armed commander. He was not authoritative, power-driven, stubborn, and self-centered. He was alone in the context without any physical protection.

Like an ordinary person, Elijah felt fear in a life-threatening situation and even asked God to take his life in fear (1 Kings 19:3-4). He was honest about his feelings and did not hide them from God. He opened himself to God and asked for God's provision and guidance. The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath shows his unique and

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<sup>48</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 37A, *The Anchor Bible* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 335.

<sup>49</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "empathy," accessed April 7, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00074155;jsessionid=3EC61E04C3AE039F57D32E50D9AEE0F5>.

exceptional leadership—a leader who suffers together and shares lives with heart, not head.

Elijah's first response to the weary and starving widow was, "Don't be afraid (17:13, CEB, NIV, NLT, NRSV)." His statement is translated as "Don't worry about a thing" in *The Message Bible*. The utterance has been recognized as the introduction of the "salvation oracle," implying God's active intervention and powerful presence in any circumstance.<sup>50</sup> In other words, "Don't be afraid" is more than a literal meaning. It assured dramatic change in the widow's circumstances and a promise of survival and food. His words gave comfort, hope, and relief to the widow.

As explained earlier, Elijah and the widow had nothing in common except for their social status as a minority and scarcity in the context. Yet, Elijah heard the widow's concerns and pain in the hopeless situation and struggles as a minority whose social status made her even more isolated, uncared for, and marginalized in society. He was not authoritative to her, demanding that she followed the Word of God. Instead, he first recognized her fear of the hopeless situation before assuring her of God's provision. This response can be understood as a gesture and response from his empathetic heart toward the widow.

The following story of raising the widow's dead son also shows Elijah's empathy. Elijah was concerned about the widow suffering another loss after her husband's passing. He again begged God's intervention for her, not for her dead child, because he felt the widow's tragic pain.<sup>51</sup> He cried out and prayed to God, "O Lord my God, why have you

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<sup>50</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, 211.

<sup>51</sup> Kalmanofsky, "Women of God," 65-66.

brought tragedy to this widow who has opened her home to me, causing her son to die (17:20b, NLT)?” His heartfelt prayer was his response to the suffering mother’s appeal.<sup>52</sup>

In both episodes, Elijah recognized the widow’s heart filled with desperation, pain, and suffering. His empathetic responses were possible not only because he was miraculously fed by ravens when he got hungry (17:5-6), but also because he saw the widow with compassion and an empathetic heart just like God would see her. His personal experience of God’s empathetic care and love motivated him to practice the same spirit toward the widow. Through the widow, Elijah powerfully experienced God, who rescued, fed, and led him until that point, and actively practiced God’s love for the widow in great pain through his words, actions, and prayers.

As mentioned earlier, the Letter of James refers to Elijah as an example of the power of prayer. One of the distinctions of the letter from other ancient moral literature is that James is not individualistic but communitarian.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the letter, the author constantly exhorts moral attitudes and behaviors in the early church community. The letter shows his emphasis on solidarity, mercy, and compassion for orphans and widows (1:27), the poor (2:5), the oppressed (5:4), and the sick and sinful (5:14-16).<sup>54</sup> To the author of the letter, Elijah validates the power of prayer and supports his teaching and pursuit of being a member of a faith community, embracing others, and caring for each other. Both Elijah and the Letter of James prove God’s heart toward humanity, which can be revealed through empathetic care and presence in a relational and communal setting.

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<sup>52</sup> Kalmanofsky, “Women of God,” 65-66.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, “The Letter of James,” 180.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, “The Letter of James,” 180-81.

## Conclusion

The narrative of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8-16 is an excellent example of empathetic leadership. God led these two figures, who were substantially different, but in great desperation, to be part of God's miraculous story. Both experienced God's work, turning scarcity into abundance, death into life, and hopelessness into hope. The story proves God's sovereignty and omnipotence, reachable to every part of God's creation. Contextual, cultural, religious, and geographical elements of the story support God's unlimited power and influence onto the whole universe beyond social categories and boundaries.

As argued above, this chapter enables us to understand Elijah from a variety of perspectives and reveals his identity as a person of God, a person of prayer, and a person of empathy. Along with other biblical stories, it proves that his authority was given by God, and the power of his prayer was not coming from his prophetic identity but from his prayer life, which enabled him to understand God's empathetic heart for humanity and see others with God's eyes. Elijah's prayer life enabled him to serve as an empathetic spiritual leader. Elijah showed God's care for the widow through his empathetic presence and righteousness.

1 Kings 17:8-16 illustrates that when we have a prayer life, we can deeply listen to the voice of God and the voices of others—God's beautiful creatures and precious children—through God's empathetic heart. Feeding the starving widow and her child reminds us of how God provides for our needs and fills our spiritual hunger and thirst. As can be seen from Elijah's immediate recognition of the widow's fear and concerns, God

already knows our helplessness and despair caused by constant worldly temptations and challenges. As the widow rediscovered God's presence and power in her life through Elijah's empathetic response to her needs, leaders in faith communities should play a role of listener and respond to different congregational needs in the entire church.

Empathy is a significant feature of spiritual leadership in faith communities. The foundation of empathy is understanding God's heart toward humanity. Empathy in faith communities is only possible when we are intimately connected to God and faithfully willing to listen to God and others. Only prayer life makes it possible. Empathy and prayer are indispensable to spiritual leadership, not only for clergy but for laity. These are the primary focuses of this project's hypothesis and goal—training empathetic leadership through listening prayer.

Elijah's prophetic, spiritual, and empathetic presence in 1 Kings 17:8-16 and other biblical resources suggests a God-like leadership style that rejoices with those who rejoice and mourns with those who mourn (Rom. 12:15). Like God never ignores our pain and suffering, a faith community needs those who wholeheartedly go through all ups and downs together and represent God's ever-presence in personal and communal lives. This leadership style may be more positively applied to cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry settings where leaders often have difficulty deeply listening to others' voices, embracing them, and practicing God's universal love because of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

For these reasons, this chapter asserts that lay leaders who practice listening prayer in their lives can become empathetic by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in ministry. As shown above, empathy is a lens through which to see



various needs in individuals and the world and respond to them as God would do by listening and feeling for and with them.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Korean Protestant Christianity started with the arrival of foreign missionaries from other countries, including the United States, in the late nineteenth century. The number of Protestant Christians in Korea grew to more than twenty-five thousand by 1900 and to approximately two hundred thousand—800% growth—in the next ten years.<sup>1</sup> Many historians and theologians believe the rapid expansion of Christianity in the Korean peninsula during the period mentioned above attributes to the sacrifice and dedication of numerous indigenous female evangelists, “Bible Women” (*chōndo puin*). Having focused disproportionately on missional strategies and the actual work that the missionaries engaged in, however, the current scholarly works largely failed to sufficiently describe how indigenous people accepted and recreated a new religion into their own lives and respective communities and the powerful impact their important work had in Korean society and the history of Protestant Christianity in general.<sup>2</sup> In addition, male-centered interpretative perspectives have overlooked women’s contribution to Korean

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<sup>1</sup> Sung-Deuk Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity: Protestant Encounters with Korean Religions, 1876-1915* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), xv.

<sup>2</sup> K. Kale Yu, *Understanding Korean Christianity: Grassroot Perspectives on Causes, Culture, and Responses* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 8.

Christianity.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, countless Bible Women were not recognized in the history of Christianization of Korea for a long time.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of the Korean Bible Women were those who were marginalized socially, economically, and culturally. Ironically, their social status satisfied foreign missionaries' needs to approach indigenous women and isolated places with appropriate cultural, social, and religious awareness in local settings. Despite the cultural, social, and gender-oriented barriers that had restricted their work, the Bible Women courageously stood up for evangelism, mission, and spreading God's Word. Furthermore, they played a crucial role in initiating a cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry from various perspectives between Western missionaries and Koreans, the educated and uneducated, and low and high social classes, to name a few. Due to the active and decisive role that the Bible Women's ministry played in the late nineteenth century, even before the Pyongyang Revival in 1907, the most well-known and most significant revival of Korean Protestant history, a group of new scholars has begun to make a concerted effort to highlight these lesser-known figures.

This chapter focuses on Korean Bible Women, *chōndo puin* in Korean, who influenced the development of the earliest Christian communities in Korea, especially in geographically, socially, and culturally isolated places, such as the countryside and gender-restricted female spaces, and people from low social classes without educational opportunities. This chapter attends to the identity, contribution, and spiritual leadership of

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<sup>3</sup> Sebastian C. H. Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Sungjin Chang, "Korean Bible Women: Their Vital Contribution to Korean Protestantism, 1895-1945" (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, 2005), 183.

Korean Bible Women from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. By so doing, it attempts to offer illustrative insights into why it is imperative to support the need and power of empathetic lay leadership in faith communities by means of prayer practices and heartfelt self-giving ministry.

### *The Beginning of Korean Protestant Christianity*

In 1884, Horace Newton Allen, a medical missionary from the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), arrived in Korea (*Chosŏn*, back then) as the first Protestant missionary.<sup>5</sup> Although it is true that Allen was the first Western missionary who stepped into the country, this was not the first time Korea or Koreans encountered Christians and foreign missionaries.<sup>6</sup> About a hundred years before Allen's arrival, a small group of Koreans converted to Roman Catholicism and experienced severe persecutions and executions from 1791 until 1866.<sup>7</sup> French Catholic missionaries also entered Korea prior to the arrival of American missionaries, but all were executed in 1839 and 1866.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, progressive young elite Koreans, who were sent to Japan

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<sup>5</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, xv.

<sup>6</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 20-21; Sebastian C. H. Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity*, 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 20. With the support of William E. Griffis' viewpoint, Oak addresses that 1784 is the official beginning of the Roman Catholic Church in Korea (Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 14, 47).

<sup>8</sup> Norman Dwight Harris, *Europe and the East* (London, United Kingdom: Allen and Unwin, 1927), 42, quoted in Lark-June George Paik, *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea, 1832-1910* (1929; repr., Seoul, Republic of Korea: Yonsei University Press, 1987), 62.

under the treaty of 1876, accepted Protestant Christianity as a new ideological-religious tool for achieving Korea's development and modernization.<sup>9</sup>

Korea instituted a treaty with the United States in 1882, the first time Korea made a treaty with a Western country. However, it is important to remember that when Robert S. Maclay entered Korea in 1883, it was only a little over a decade since the executions of indigenous Catholics and Catholic foreign missionaries.<sup>10</sup> Naturally, Christianity was viewed with deep skepticism and hostility, making any proselytization efforts legally prohibited.<sup>11</sup> However, King Gojong, who was in favor of Westernization, approved Maclay's educational and medical work for various reasons.<sup>12</sup> On April 5, 1885, on Easter Sunday of the year, Henry Gerhard Appenzeller and Horace Grant Underwood took their first steps on the Korean peninsula as the first clerical missionaries from the Methodist and Presbyterian denominations, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

By 1910, more than 400 missionaries had been sent to Korea, mainly from Methodist and Presbyterian mission boards in North America.<sup>14</sup> As Table 1 shows, among the approximately 500 foreign Protestant missionaries sent to Korea between 1884 and 1910, nearly four out of five missionaries in Korea were sent by the Methodist or Presbyterian churches in the United States.

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<sup>9</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 20-21; Sebastian C. H. Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity*, 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 190.

<sup>11</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 21; Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 190.

<sup>12</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 191.

<sup>13</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 307.

Table 1. Denominational Composition of Protestant Missionaries in Korea, 1884-1910<sup>15</sup>

	NP	NM	SP	SM	AP	CP	CE	Others
Number	165	114	62	46	27	15	16	54
Ratio	33%	23%	12%	9%	5.4%	3%	3%	11%

\* NP=Presbyterian Church (U.S.); NM=Methodist Episcopal Church (U.S.); SP=Presbyterian Church (U.S.); SM=Methodist Episcopal Church, South (U.S.); AP=Australian Presbyterian Church; CP=Canadian Presbyterian Church; CE=Church of England; Others include Salvation Army, Oriental Missionary Society, Seventh Day Adventists.

These missionaries were dominantly young and well-educated.<sup>16</sup> In the very early twentieth century, there were more female missionaries than male missionaries.<sup>17</sup>

However, starting in 1884, the country went through an unparalleled series of political upheavals, including major internal uprisings and international war on the territory, which eventually resulted in Japanese colonization in 1910.<sup>18</sup>

### *Missional Challenges in Korean Cultural Background*

From 1885, when the first-Protestant clerical missionaries resided in the country, to 1910, Korea—more precisely, the *Chosŏn* dynasty—was ruled by a king; and a strict male-focused culture and tradition dominated the country.<sup>19</sup> Women did not usually have educational opportunities, even those who were members of elite, wealthy circles.

Education was given only to boys and men. Likewise, female patients were not treated by male doctors. In a home, spaces of men and women were strictly separated, each space

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<sup>15</sup> This table is based on: Sŭngtae Kim and Haejin Pak, *내한 선교사 총람: 1884-1984 Naehan Sŏngyosa Chongram: 1884-1984* [A Directory of Protestant Missionaries in Korea: 1884-1984] (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Institute of the History of Christianity in Korea, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 307.

<sup>17</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 306.

<sup>18</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 191.

<sup>19</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 172.

being restricted to one gender. Under this social norm that strictly separated spaces by gender, foreign missionaries' interactions with those of the opposite gender were strongly forbidden. Therefore, the best chance for women missionaries who wanted to interact with Korean women was to meet them in their homes, not on the street and in public, because only women could enter the other women's private spaces.

However, all foreign missionaries who entered Korea during this period had one common barrier to proselytization: their Korean language skill was extremely limited. As a result of their lack of communication skills, foreign missionaries had a hard time—for an extensive amount of time—gaining a complete understanding of Korean culture and tradition, preventing them from developing an appropriate missional method. For the reasons above, there was a pressing need for indigenous people's support and active engagement in evangelization.<sup>20</sup>

### **Korean Bible Women: Spiritual Leaders of Prayer and Empathy**

#### *Identity of Korean Bible Women*

Korean Bible Women were passionate, self-giving, and devoted evangelists. They were critical to Protestantism's growth in Korea. Bible Women were called *chōndo puin* in Korean. In Korean, *chōndo* means evangelism and *puin* means married woman, so a *chōndo puin* is a female evangelist.<sup>21</sup> Another title for Bible Women was *puin kwonsō*,

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<sup>20</sup> When North American Protestant missionaries entered the country, Korea was religiously under the mixed influence of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Tonghak. See Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Chang, "Korean Bible Women," 1.

emphasizing their primary role of selling the Bible and copies of doctrine and other readings.<sup>22</sup> Missionaries' documents in English called both *chōndo puin* and *puin kwonsō* Bible Women. In the early twentieth century, after the Korean Great Awakening, the roles of *chōndo puin* were developed in church-related institutions, such as hospitals and schools. In contrast, *puin kwonsō* paid more attention to the local communities and devoted more time and energy to conversion.<sup>23</sup>

Here, it is worth noting that Korean Bible Women were trained laity, not ordained ministers. The first group of Bible Women were from uneducated lower-class families. Often, they were middle-aged or even older, widowed, and impoverished.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, their age was beneficial for their ministerial roles because young women were often less respected in traditional Korean society due to the Confucian culture that emphasized respect towards the elders. In a similar vein, older women were often given more freedom of mobility, which made itinerant evangelism feasible and more suitable for them.<sup>25</sup>

As K. Kale Yu, a historian of world Christianity, argues, some Bible Women had previously lived with abusive husbands or mothers-in-law and had troubled histories.<sup>26</sup> Others had more marginalized and socially disrespected backgrounds, such as shamans or female entertainers.<sup>27</sup> Some scholars claim that their relatively lower social status allowed

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<sup>22</sup> Chang, "Korean Bible Women," 185.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, "Korean Bible Women," 186.

<sup>24</sup> Lee-Ellen Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success: Using the *Anbang* Network and the Religious Authority of the *Mudang*," *Journal of Korean Religions* 3, no.1 (April 2012): 118, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23943321>; Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 165.

<sup>25</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 177.

<sup>26</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 174.

<sup>27</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 118.



them to spend more time in ministry as they had fewer family duties and other social responsibilities.<sup>28</sup> Later, Bible Women represented all social classes, from severe poverty to privileged nobility.<sup>29</sup>

At the time those Bible Women engaged in mission work, the culture of Korea was predominantly male-dominated, elite-driven, and wealth-centered. The society was markedly stratified by class, gender, and age. Under this circumstance, the marginalized status of Korean Bible Women made them be regarded less as leaders or those with power, and they experienced harsh exclusion and oppression. For instance, some missionaries left notes on Korean women's work, but most women who appeared in their notes were nameless. They were called by unpleasant, derogatory, and sometimes dismissive nicknames—*Kae-dongee* (개똥이; dog-muck), *Kkŭn-nyŏnee* (꼴년이; last brat), and *Sŏp-sŏbee* (ష업이; the deplorable), implying their families' disappointment at the birth of a girl in the patriarchal society. They were often referred to as someone's daughter, mother, wife, or grandmother, which showed their subordinate relationship to father, husband, and son for the entirety of their lives. Therefore, being named when

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<sup>28</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 118; S. Kate Cooper, "The Bible Women," *The Korea Magazine* 1.1 (1917): 8, quoted in Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 119.

women were baptized was a reformatory and life-changing experience of liberation and freedom, granting a new identity and being equalized with men.<sup>30</sup>

The first group of Bible Women, mostly uneducated and illiterate, were informally taught and trained in women missionaries' houses.<sup>31</sup> Mary F. Scranton, the first woman missionary sent to Korea by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), first started the Bible Women system in 1888.<sup>32</sup> The first two Bible Women appeared in the 1888 Annual Report of WFMS, and the two women were recorded as "native workers."<sup>33</sup> While Korean churches were rapidly growing, the need for indigenous female leaders significantly increased for evangelism and support in Korean churches.<sup>34</sup> The WFMS of the Methodist Church exclusively contributed to reaching out to indigenous women in Korea.<sup>35</sup>

### *Contribution of Korean Bible Women*

Korean Bible Women's initial roles were translators and cultural interpreters for foreign women missionaries.<sup>36</sup> However, soon enough, the leadership of the Bible

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<sup>30</sup> Chang, "Korean Bible Women," 48-49; Deokjoo Rhie, *한국 교회 처음 여성들* [Early Christian Women in Korea], (2007; repr., Seoul, Republic of Korea: Hong Sung Sa, 2014), 39-40.

<sup>31</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 170.

<sup>32</sup> Ch'unbyōng Yun, *한국 감리교 교회 성장사* *Hanguk Gamnikyo Kyohoe Sōngjangsa* [History of the growth of the Korean Methodist Church] (Seoul, Republic of Korea: Methodist Publishing House, 1997), 104, quoted in Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 118.

<sup>33</sup> Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, *Seventieth Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Year 1888* (New York, NY: Printed for the Society, 1889), 340, 344.

<sup>34</sup> Chang, "Korean Bible Women," 120.

<sup>35</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 119.

Women reached every part of the mission and ministry and every corner of the country. They played multiple roles, from menial to typically modern pastoral tasks, including preaching, teaching, caring, leading prayer meetings, Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and charity works. They itinerated villages, worked in dispensaries and hospitals offering pastoral care, medical assistance, and administrative support, taught at schools, served as matrons of school dormitories, and provided other important social services.<sup>37</sup>

If we focus on the religious dimension of their work, it becomes apparent that the Bible Women worked, served, and operated in separate areas not only from foreign women missionaries but also from Korean Christian men who supported foreign men missionaries and Korean men.<sup>38</sup> In his evaluation of the Bible Women's devotions and contributions, Yu writes, "They filled the gaps on the mission field more than any other person and in the church and mission organization."<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Dana Roberts, a renowned scholar of mission history, considers Bible Women's ministry "the first independent ministry role" given to Christian women in Korea.<sup>40</sup>

As the people who served in ministry between foreign missionaries and the indigenous population, it is essential to underscore the ways in which Bible Women assisted, supported, and empowered foreign women missionaries in the cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry setting. First, as translators, Bible Women were an integral part of every communication between missionaries and indigenous Koreans. Second, as cultural-

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<sup>37</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 167.

<sup>38</sup> Chang, "Korean Bible Women," 180.

<sup>39</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 167.

<sup>40</sup> Dana L. Roberts, *Christian Missions: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 139.

social interpreters, they provided and ensured the much-needed cultural sensitivity to and awareness of the local norms.<sup>41</sup> When a woman missionary and a Bible Woman paired to serve, the Bible Women communicated using vernacular Korean for local people.<sup>42</sup> Considering their irreplaceable roles, it is no surprise that Bible Women's outstanding knowledge of Korean culture exceptionally guided and supported women missionaries on trips and in other situations.<sup>43</sup>

Along with their expertise in local culture and norms, Korean Bible Women's marginalized social status became a great asset to expand the mission's broad reach in the Korean peninsula.<sup>44</sup> Although it is true that their strength lies in no other than "their personal narrative and impassioned belief in the power of the gospel,"<sup>45</sup> Bible Women's deep pain and vulnerability from abusive and disenfranchised backgrounds empowered other women to overcome their own life tribulations in faith.<sup>46</sup> Bible Women frequently centered the core messages of the Bible around their authentically personal stories, and they often recognized and valued everyone as part of the church regardless of their social status and past situations.<sup>47</sup> They saw themselves no longer as passive victims of the

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<sup>41</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 178-79.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, *Christian Mission*, 139.

<sup>43</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 179-80.

<sup>44</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 165.

<sup>45</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 174.

<sup>46</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 118.

<sup>47</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 118.

violent social system; rather, they redefined themselves as active evangelists who stood for and with God, voiced for others, and fought against the oppressive social system.

For example, Samdŏk Chŏn, a well-known Bible Woman who was born to an elite family, was baptized in 1895 and converted approximately 600 people. In 1925 at the celebration of her thirty years of evangelism, she professed freedom in Christ, a fruit of Christian faith from social oppression.<sup>48</sup> Sadie Kim is another Bible Woman who was widowed at the age of eighteen and was baptized in 1896. She visited 2,016 homes in one year, five to six homes each day, including Sunday, to share the good news and support and empower marginalized women in society.<sup>49</sup> She organized the Ladies Aid Society (보호여회, *Bohoyeohoi*) and Widows Relief Association (과부회, *Gwabuhoi*) for women's independence, evangelism, humanitarianism, and self-development.<sup>50</sup> She also played an integral part in the Korean independence movement from Japanese colonialism.<sup>51</sup>

While Korean society devalued widowed and uneducated women, missionaries empowered Bible Women, and they revalued their marginalized status and availability, which were assets to reach out to the countryside and those whose social status was as low as theirs.<sup>52</sup> They gradually increased the accessibility of the Bible to Korean women and took an essential part in enhancing literacy among Korean women at the turn of the

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<sup>48</sup> Rhie, *한국 교회 처음 여성들* [Early Christian Women in Korea], 29-30.

<sup>49</sup> Rhie, *한국 교회 처음 여성들* [Early Christian Women in Korea], 34, 39, 42.

<sup>50</sup> Rhie, *한국 교회 처음 여성들* [Early Christian Women in Korea], 42-43.

<sup>51</sup> Rhie, *한국 교회 처음 여성들* [Early Christian Women in Korea], 43.

<sup>52</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 165.

twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> They often traveled to isolated regions, mostly on foot, and developed local Christian communities wherever they went. Mountains and freezing winter weather could not stop their passion for bringing the gospel to remote villages. Despite poor living conditions and a shortage of food and clothing on trips, they were willing to sacrifice themselves to spread the gospel to every corner of the country. It is hard to understate the extent to which their sacrifice, devotion, and selflessness played an integral role in the expansion of Christianity in Korea.<sup>54</sup>

Bible Women also reached out to women of the elite class whose interaction with the outside world was greatly limited by social and cultural restrictions. The space, called *anbang* (or *anpang*, 안방, meaning the inner room) in a traditional Korean house only for women, was considered as an ‘imprisoned’ room for women and some missionaries, such as Lilius Horton Underwood and Frederic Arthur Mackenzie, noticed this.<sup>55</sup> However, this place can also be interpreted as a power-concentrated space for women where women discussed and controlled familial, political, and economic issues, meaning its exclusivity and limited openness provided Korean women with both power and restraints.<sup>56</sup> The space also provided educational opportunities for women and supported women’s literacy.<sup>57</sup> While Bible Women were deeply involved in the *anbang* network,

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<sup>53</sup> Strawn, “Korean Bible Women’s Success,” 120.

<sup>54</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 183-84.

<sup>55</sup> Chang, “Korean Bible Women,” 51-54.

<sup>56</sup> Chang, “Korean Bible Women,” 54.

<sup>57</sup> Chang, “Korean Bible Women,” 53.

the private space functioned as a great network that enabled evangelism, women's religious-social awakening, and cultural empowerment.

From the perspective of Christian egalitarianism and liberation, Bible Women were not only granted a new identity but actively shared with others the power of God's universal salvation regardless of their status.<sup>58</sup> They took a leadership role in church ministry and mission and revealed female equality through their words and actions.<sup>59</sup> While no formal education was offered to girls and women in Korea, God used the powerless and worthless group of people, from the cultural and social viewpoint, to awaken the society and spread the seeds of the gospel in every heart and every corner of the country. They proved that not society, but God of a new religion saved them and liberated them from various social restrictions, such as domestic violence, lack of education, and sexual discrimination. Thanks to the sacrificial missional work of the Korean Bible Women, the message of Christian freedom was rapidly shared with more and more women in the country. There was no instant social and institutional change in Korean society; however, individual, communal, and grassroot changes happened gradually but dramatically through the actions of Bible Women.

### *Spiritual Leadership of Korean Bible Women*

Among many factors that made the gradual and dramatic changes possible, we need to pay particular attention to the ways in which Korean Bible Women exemplified spiritual leadership centered around prayer and empathy. Often Bible Women were

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<sup>58</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 165.

<sup>59</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 119.

considered spiritually powerful believers where their powers were granted by the Holy Spirit.<sup>60</sup> They were invited to offer a fervent prayer for the sick and troubled.<sup>61</sup> Many missionary reports underscored that Bible Women were very actively involved in ministry of healing and exorcism through their prayers.<sup>62</sup> Many Bible Women visited possessed women with their fellow female missionaries and female congregants to offer a prayer meeting for deliverance from evil spirit(s).<sup>63</sup> Indigenous Korean people were not concerned with whether or not Bible Women were ordained. What was more important to those who were influenced by Bible Women was that they were deeply connected to God and could pray to God for whatever needs and situations people had.

Mary F. Scranton, one of the first women missionaries in Korea, wrote in her 1897 report about the academic progress and faithfulness of the students and a voluntarily created prayer meeting among the students.<sup>64</sup> These students were not Bible Women yet, but her report gives an important clue that Bible Women's spiritual practice of prayer was established during their training process. Similarly, the 1919 report of the Work of Korean Women describes a Bible Woman named Sarah, occasionally calling her "The Faithful": "She was not very well educated; far from it, as we term "educated" (!) but she

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<sup>60</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 131.

<sup>61</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 131.

<sup>62</sup> Yeong Woo Liptak, "Bible Women: Evangelism and Cultural Transformation in the Early Korean Church" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 2014), 79; Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 178-79.

<sup>63</sup> Oak, *The Making Korean Christianity*, 178.

<sup>64</sup> Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of Methodist Episcopal Church, *Annual Report of Woman's Foreign Missionary Society 1897*, 90, quoted in Deokjoo Rhie, *스크랜턴: 어머니와 아들의 조선 선교 이야기* [Samaritans' Love Story in Korea: Life and Mission Works of Mrs. Mary Fletcher Scranton and Her Son William Benton Scranton, the Pioneer Missionaries to Korea] (2014; repr., Seoul, Republic of Korea: Gong-Ok Publishing House, 2015), 358.



knew how to pray and how to tell the story to get hold of the hearts of the women.”<sup>65</sup> In the same report, the author described the life of prayer among Bible Women in Suwon District:

These women are never too busy to pray. Women’s Friday night prayer meetings are held in many parts of the District. Prayer groups for Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society in connection with the Jubilee have been organized. “One hundred day” prayer meetings have been held either at daybreak or in the evenings.<sup>66</sup>

Bible Women’s massive emphasis on prayer can also be seen in the 1931 Annual Chemulpo District Evangelistic Report. Here, the foreign woman missionary Margaret Hess wrote, “The Bible woman is a great woman of prayer.”<sup>67</sup> The rich examples introduced above commonly indicate that regardless of background, Bible Women practiced regular prayers alone or together. That partly explains why they were known as “women of prayer.”

As described above, another distinctive characteristic of Korean Bible Women is empathy. Bible Women who had abusive and oppressed experiences understood others in a similar situation and wholeheartedly felt for them. It was only possible because they truly suffered together. Women missionaries themselves first demonstrated a Christian life of empathy and love to Korean women.<sup>68</sup> Mary F. Scranton was also a fifty-two-year

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<sup>65</sup> Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Work of Methodist Women in Korea Twenty First Annual Conference 1919*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Work of Methodist Women in Korea Twenty First Annual Conference 1919*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of Methodist Episcopal Church, *Annual Report of the Member of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society in Korea 1931*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Liptak, “Bible Women,” 115.

widow when she started her mission in Korea in 1885.<sup>69</sup> Because widows were a dominant group of Bible Women, her background made it easier to create empathetic relationships with other widowed Bible Women. That empathy became the foundation of her dedication until she died in Korea. An example of empathy by Bible Women can be seen in Drusilla Lee. Lee, whose Korean name was Kyung Suk Lee, was known for taking off and giving her coat and skirt to a barefoot woman in winter as she felt sorry for the poor woman, who later was converted by Drusilla's heartfelt act of kindness.<sup>70</sup>

As we discuss the centrality of empathy in Korean Bible Women's ministry, it is imperative to recognize that their manifestation of empathy is more than just emotion and goodwill. Rather, it largely indicates Korean Bible Women's profound interaction with other marginalized women and their authentic passion for spreading the gospel to the most vulnerable. Their spiritual inspiration can also be understood from the perspective of the story of Elijah and the widow in Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8-16. The previous chapter has described Elijah's empathetic spiritual leadership through his encounter with the widow. As he understood God's heart toward himself and the widow, he interacted with her with a God-like heart. Similar to the biblical story, when Korean Bible Women understood and accepted God's heart toward them despite, if not due to, their social, cultural, and economic status, their hearts were on fire for God and the gospel; and they could not stand keeping God's love to themselves.

Bible Women's work was not solely confined to the interaction with the disenfranchised. According to Mattie W. Noble (Mrs. W. A. Noble), Sadie Kim, a Bible

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<sup>69</sup> Yu, *Korean Christianity*, 176.

<sup>70</sup> Liptak, "Bible Women," 120-21.

Woman from an elite family, visited those who lost their loved ones to support and comfort them in sorrow more than two times each month. When new believers or non-believers were reluctant to wash and shroud a family's dead body, she did it instead, even though it was supposed to be done by its own family or a vocationally trained one.<sup>71</sup> The cultural and social expectations of an elite woman were not more significant than her pure heart toward others. Her self-giving ministry showed her empathetic serving leadership for others' pain and sorrow. It was only possible because she experienced God first and could not stop sharing and showing the love of God to others.

Empathetic leadership was also found in another Bible Woman's life. When she was insulted by Korean men, an unknown Bible Woman confessed her heart for others by saying, "If I obey Jesus, their insults will not hurt me. I want to do all I can to help my Korean sisters to get the same peace in their hearts that I have in mine, because I love and serve Christ."<sup>72</sup>

Bible Women's personal encounters with God gave them a new life; therefore, they were eager to let others experience the life-changing experience. Their experience and passion for evangelism were powerful because their God was understood by their minds and experienced in their hearts. As God came into their hearts and touched and healed their brokenness, they also saw others as God would see them; and they heard and mourned as God would do with and for them. Through their empathetic presence and

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<sup>71</sup> Rhie, *한국 교회 처음 여성들* [Early Christian Women in Korea], 41-42.

<sup>72</sup> Frances J. Baker, *The Story of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1869-1895*, rev. ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Curts & Jennings, 1898), 344.

leadership, God's message was revealed to those whose lives were hurt, oppressed, and isolated; and God's light was delivered to those in darkness.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter shows how and why Korean Bible Women's ministry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries proves the powerful influence of lay leadership based on prayer and empathy. As discussed, Bible Women from different backgrounds devoted and sacrificed themselves for evangelism and mission. Their contribution to Korean society is extraordinary not only from the perspective of religious fervor but also from the viewpoints of education, public health, and social services. Bible Women's passionate and self-giving ministry proves that God uses all God's people for God's work, not only socially privileged and educated groups of people. In the male-dominant patriarchal society influenced by Confucianism, Bible Women first fully experienced God's comfort and salvation. This life-changing experience gave these women a new identity in Christ regardless of social class, educational level, marital status, age, and past. Nameless women received a Christian name for the first time in their lives. Bible Women learned about God and shared the gospel with others through their words and deeds wherever they were sent, whatever role they were assigned.

Bible Women's leadership can also be considered a positive example of cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry in Korean Christian history. They were spiritual leaders of prayer and empathy beyond cultural differences between foreign women missionaries and Koreans, between men and women, between low and high social classes, between educated and uneducated groups, and between developed cities and secluded villages. As

Elijah represented God's empathy to the widow in Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8-16 despite different cultural, social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, Korean Bible Women showed God's heart to all humanity, including those who were marginalized, unwelcomed, excluded, and disrespected in society. In their ministry, social and cultural norms had no power, only God and God's Word. These un-ordained female evangelists proved that God's love and liberation from social oppressions were equally given to all without exception. Until then, true freedom was not given to any of the men and women in Korean society and religions.

The formative power of Korean Bible Women's self-giving ministry was their prayer life. It led them to understand God's equal empathetic heart for all humanity and see others with God's eyes that did not judge their past, social class, gender, or lack of education. Their prayer life enabled them to understand God's empathy for humanity, with no exception. Prayer expanded their heart to others to empathize with other women's pain and sufferings as God would do to them.

The example of Bible Women in Korean Protestant history supports that when lay leaders nurture their spiritual capacity and practice a life centered around daily prayers, they can deeply understand God's heart toward themselves and eventually see others through the lens of God's empathetic heart. Empathy guides leaders to break out of their small worlds, restricted by their own culture, ethnicity, and background, and join in God's world, which is open to everyone. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28)." The life and ministry of Jesus Christ show empathetic spiritual leadership, embracing all the brokenhearted and making space for everyone. This same leadership style is found in the

life and ministry of Korean Bible Women. In God and with God, as Jesus demonstrated, and as Korean Bible Women proved, prayer enables leaders to become empathetic by paying attention to others' voices and needs and responding to them wholeheartedly through their ministry.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

The Johannine profession, “The Word was God (John 1:1)” and “The Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14),” proclaims the Christian belief of God embodied in human flesh and living with humanity. This doctrine of the incarnation is a theological understanding of the nature of God. It is a part of Christology, the doctrine about the person, nature, and work of Jesus, and the nature and work of God through Jesus. The theology of Jesus is closely related to the understanding of Jesus’ appearance and his death on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice of God. In times when Jesus was dominantly understood through his messianic role, his crucifixion and death to save humanity from sins constituted the focus of Christology. However, the doctrine of incarnation is directly linked to the fulfillment of the divine promise through Jesus, the savior, messiah, and redeemer—the work of Jesus. Not focusing on and understanding Christology through the person of Jesus has limited the fuller and richer understanding of Jesus.

The fundamental question for the incarnation is the reason for the embodiment of God in the form of human flesh as Jesus Christ. This chapter approaches this question by positing that it was inevitable for God to be involved in human history by taking the form of human flesh and living a mortal life. God chose to be with humanity on earth. God could have chosen a different way of divine revelation in the life of humanity, as God did

with the burning bush, dreams, and voices found in the stories of the Hebrew Bible.

However, God willingly chose to reveal God's self in human flesh, be known as the Lord, become one of them, one of us, and share daily life with people on earth. Through God's self-revelation in human flesh, God came close to humanity as the one who could be recognized, felt, and experienced in daily human life. To see Jesus as the whole person, therefore, the doctrine of the incarnation should be understood as the most powerful example of God's divine self-revelation and the most empathetic revelation of God in human history.

From the lens of empathy, this chapter understands the incarnation as God's unavoidable decision for humanity. Regarding God incarnate as God's inevitable empathetic revelation leads to a new approach to understanding Jesus as a person of empathy. The life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ show his empathetic presence in human life as he mourned and provided for human needs out of his heart for the people. His empathy led him to actively respond to various forms of oppression by becoming one of the rejected, unwelcome, and marginalized. Various Scriptures show that Jesus' empathetic presence preceded his active response to people, issues, and situations, including his death on the cross. God *in* Jesus truly touched deep inside human hearts and revealed divine presence and activity. The work of God *in* Jesus represents God's self-giving, empathetic revelation and presence. Jesus' empathetic presence suggests the image of a faith community in which all believers listen to others' cries and stories and share daily moments and lives. It also confirms the world, in other words, the kingdom of God, in which everyone is invited, accepted, and embraced beyond any social categories and particular culture or ethnicity.



This chapter is organized into four parts: (1) Incarnation: God *in* Jesus, (2) God's Empathetic Revelation, (3) Jesus' Empathetic Presence, and (4) Empathetic Community with God and Jesus. This chapter attends to various scriptural and traditional resources and Christological perspectives in the twentieth century, including feminist theology. The following theologians' ideas are included: Donald M. Baillie, Paul Tillich, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Edward Farley, and Chung Hyun Kyung.

By understanding the doctrine of the incarnation as God's inevitable empathetic self-revelation and analyzing Jesus' empathetic presence in his life and ministry, this chapter supports the need and power of empathetic lay leadership in the faith community by means of intentional daily listening prayer to become open to different voices and embrace different needs in ministry. It also suggests the applicable viewpoint of empathetic lay leadership in cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry as different voices and needs are often neglected due to cultural differences and misunderstanding.

### **God Incarnate, Empathetic Revelation and Presence**

#### *Incarnation: God in Jesus*

Christology is the doctrine of Christ, in other words, a theological answer to the question, 'Who is Jesus?'. Jesus' identity and role have been questioned and answered throughout Christian history from all perspectives between finite and infinite time, human and divine nature, a particular and universal space, and limited and universal work.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 207.

theological understanding of Jesus Christ is all about the person, nature, and work of Jesus. Christology results from human wrestling to comprehend Jesus and develop a common knowledge about him in Christian theology.

The doctrine of Jesus is critical for theological development and understanding. Donald M. Baillie, a Scottish theologian in the twentieth century, insisted that a sound theology is only possible with a sound Christology.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, American theologians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, described that the doctrine of Christology in the early church molded the foundation which led to the Christian understanding of the triune God, the nature of humanity, the Church, and eschatology.<sup>3</sup>

Christian history shows acute theological debates regarding the person and identity of Jesus. The controversy finally reached a consensus based on the doctrine of the incarnation—“perfect in divinity and humanity, truly God and truly human” by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, despite logical challenges in fully understanding the concept.<sup>4</sup> Even after the Council, theological wrestling to understand the person of Jesus has continued. Traditional viewpoints see the person of Jesus distinctively from the work of Jesus; theologians in the twentieth century urged the inseparable connection of the person and the work of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Some theologians, including Brunner and P. T. Forsyth,

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<sup>2</sup> Donald M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London, United Kingdom: Faber Paperbacks, 1977), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 3rd ed. (Harrisonburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 158.

<sup>4</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basic Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas and Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 158.

claimed that knowing what Jesus did leads to knowing who Jesus is.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament and the early church primarily asked about the role and work of Jesus, rather than the nature of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

On the other side, systematic theology conceives that Jesus' being as the incarnate Word and Jesus' being as the savior should be understood together.<sup>8</sup> Thomas and Wondra, however, make a strong case that Christology should be treated to know about Jesus' being prior to his works.<sup>9</sup> Donald M. Baillie also points out that the foundation of Christology is a quest about God's nature and activity, rather than simply about Jesus' life and work from the perspective of psychology and history.<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing God's prevenient initiative for humanity, Baillie argues that Jesus reveals "a seeking God."<sup>11</sup> In his understanding, Jesus, distinctively from prophets or rabbis, embodies God, who goes out to find a lost sheep, i.e., those who turned away from God.<sup>12</sup> God in the Bible does not wait until God is found, called, and visited by humanity; instead, God acts and reveals God's self, even to those who run away from God.<sup>13</sup> Baillie states, "A true Christology will tell us not simply that God is *like* Christ, but that God was *in* Christ."<sup>14</sup> His rationale

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas and Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 158.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas and Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas and Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 159.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas and Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 159.

<sup>10</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 63, 66.

<sup>11</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 66.

is that there is no one who can be like God—besides God’s self—although Christian theology indicates the image of Christlike God and the attribute of God *in* Jesus.<sup>15</sup> God should be regarded as God *in* Jesus, not as Christlike God.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the quest of Jesus includes both the nature and work of God—what God has done in Jesus—to save humanity.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, understanding God *in* Jesus is imperative to understanding Jesus fully. Jesus is not simply a substitute for animal sacrifice on the altar. Although his identity as the ultimate sacrifice is not controversial and debatable, Jesus’ life has more purposes than atonement and salvation. That is because, through the life of Jesus, God revealed God’s self in Jesus and walked together with people on earth.

This approach leads to a fundamental question for the doctrine of the incarnation—why did God have to embody the form of human flesh and live together with human beings all the years until the crucifixion? The answer to this question is found when the doctrine of the incarnation is understood through the lens of empathy. There was no other way God could achieve the end goal besides revealing God’s self in Jesus on earth in order to save and live together with human beings. This is God’s ultimate divine action for humanity. God’s self-revelation in Jesus is the most powerful proof of God’s empathetic intervention in human life for salvation and God’s empathetic heart toward humankind.

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<sup>15</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 66-67.

*God's Empathetic Revelation*

All the roles of Jesus Christ transformed the relationship between God and humanity. From the relational perspective between God and humanity, Jesus, God incarnate, removed the gap between the invisible God and humanity. His sacrifice as the lamb of God restored estranged relationships between God and humanity caused by human sinfulness. The role of Jesus as the savior redeemed humanity from the chain of sin and death. The work of the Messiah fulfilled the promise of God's salvation. Yet, while the work of Jesus is focused on salvation, his divinity is often neglected. Before his crucifixion and resurrection from the dead, Jesus shared moments of his life with people on earth. Jesus ate with the crowd, walked alongside them, and went through life pains and struggles together. Jesus' presence in human life preceded salvation for humanity. His presence on earth brought God directly and closely to humanity. Borrowing the concept of Baillie, in the previous section, this may be understood as God *in* Jesus was with and among human beings.

Paul Tillich, one of the most influential theologians in the twentieth century, agrees with this perspective and emphasizes Jesus' significant nature in representing God to humanity as follows:

It is essential man who represents not only man to man but God to man; for essential man, by his very nature, represents God. He represents the original image of God embodied in man, but he does so under the conditions of estrangement between God and man... One could also speak of essential God-manhood in order to indicate the divine presence in essential manhood.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Tillich, *Existence and the Christ*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 94.

Paul Tillich considers Jesus to be the representation of God to humans. His understanding of Jesus creates an intimate connection between God and humanity through the flawless person in the form of human flesh. Tillich emphasizes that God cannot stop being God; therefore, the incarnation is God's continued work as God, not something else.<sup>19</sup> In his understanding, the Johannine proclamation that "The Word became flesh" can be regarded as God's proactive self-revelation to participate in the salvific action in human history and the universe.<sup>20</sup> His point supports the idea of God's self-revelation in the doctrine of the incarnation and its inevitability. Incarnation is not simply for the divine soteriological purpose of fulfilling the promise of the messianic figure in Jewish history. This is a holy decision of self-revelation for humanity.

Humanity has no power and wisdom to understand God fully. The embodiment of God in the form of humanity enabled humanity to encounter God with human senses. The distanced God became touchable, visible, hearable, and experienced. When Jesus was baptized, people witnessed the Spirit of God descending like a dove on him and heard the voice of God (Matt. 3:16). A woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years touched Jesus' garment, believing that healing would be possible even through touching his clothes. Her disease was immediately cured (Mark 5:25-29). Jesus' voice was heard, and his message was delivered through numerous narratives. As Paul declares in his letter to Colossians, Jesus was "the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15)." Jesus allowed people to experience God with their eyes, ears, and hands and to witness who God truly and fully is.

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<sup>19</sup> Tillich, *Existence and the Christ*, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Tillich, *Existence and the Christ*, 95.

In one of his hymns, “All Ye That Pass By,” Charles Wesley, a hymn writer in the eighteenth century, wrote “As Jesus’ cries, Impassive He Suffer; Immortal He Dies.”<sup>21</sup> He breaks a traditional patristic understanding of Jesus and describes God’s active suffering and death on the cross.<sup>22</sup> Immortal God is not impassible. God incarnate gives God’s self to death for universal love and salvation. God’s empathetic self-revelation expands the understanding of God. God indeed walked and lived among people. Likewise, God’s self-revelation allowed humans to experience God in their daily lives and know God’s closeness to them. Thus, the doctrine of the incarnation proves God’s empathetic revelation for humanity.

### *Jesus’ Empathetic Presence*

Jesus as a person of empathy represented God’s embracing, inclusive love for all humanity, not a certain group of people. Rosemary Radford Ruether, a renowned theologian in feminist and liberation theology in the twentieth century, sees Jesus from a radical viewpoint.<sup>23</sup> Jesus’ ministry is understood as a political liberator from any forms of oppression and injustice, including but not limited to poverty, sexism, and anti-Semitism.<sup>24</sup> Ruether points out that God’s compassion is found in Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God, which first invites those who are marginalized and hopeless in the

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<sup>21</sup> John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Hymns*, 1749, no. 42, quoted in John R. Tyson, ed. *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 231.

<sup>22</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas and Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 174.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas and Wondra, *Introduction to Theology*, 174.

current time and society.<sup>25</sup> But, her understanding of the kingdom of God was not limited to the powerless and neglected. Rather, she asserts that the kingdom of God is not about excluding the rich and privileged, but about whole inclusion in the new structure, which does not cause any oppressive human relationships.<sup>26</sup>

Ruether's understanding of Christology, especially the incarnation, supports Jesus' empathetic attribute, which leads to an active response to the various forms of oppression. This is in the same vein that God was involved in human history by empathetically revealing God's self in the form of flesh to redeem humanity from sin. Her approach also links God's empathetic heart for humankind and the inevitable reason for the incarnation and the work of Jesus as an empathetic leader. Feminist and liberation theology includes our human recognition and physical and active response to the situation, object, or issue. Similarly, the incarnation can be regarded as God's active response and involvement in human history, starting from deep empathy—sharing the pain of the oppressed. When Jesus came to earth, he brought the whole essence of God and lived for thirty-three years on earth. He was not only born to suffer, be crucified, and die on the cross as the lamb of God for universal salvation and be risen from the dead, breaking the darkness of death. God's incarnation is not to descend as a complete form of a grown adult to earth as the savior for universal salvation. God Almighty has the absolute power to do so if that is God's will. It means that God, being omnipotent, chose to send a savior in the form of human flesh, born in a weak and fragile condition, just like

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<sup>25</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1981), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ruether, *To Change the World*, 17.



all human beings. That also means that Jesus' earthly life as a baby, child, youth, and adult is all a part of God's divine plan for human salvation.

Edward Farley, a theologian in the twentieth century, also understands the relationship between God and Jesus as an empathetic union. It is evident that Jesus showed his empathetic presence in his ministry as God *in* Jesus has an empathetic heart for humanity. From his viewpoint, divine empathy is an act of responding to and participating in human suffering.<sup>27</sup> Farley also describes infinite and unrestricted "divine, suffering empathy."<sup>28</sup> Divine empathy does not qualify or limit anyone based on their social class, tradition, gender, or region.<sup>29</sup> As everyone is equally embraced by God, this makes one to be fully empathetic to any or all needs.<sup>30</sup> The divine empathy is beyond liberation from personal suffering and temptations. It means a complete existence in suffering empathy. Farley thinks that this divine empathy is shown in Jesus' life and ministry.<sup>31</sup> From his perspective, both God's and Jesus' empathy can be understood as a divine response toward humanity. It leads to the new community, which is universal, redemptive, and reconciling: "in suffering empathy that God and Jesus are united."<sup>32</sup> This view also suggests the idea of community, that all believers should dream and vision with God and Jesus beyond cultural and ethnic boundaries through an empathetic approach.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 281-82.

<sup>28</sup> Farley, *Divine Empathy*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Farley, *Divine Empathy*, 282.

<sup>30</sup> Farley, *Divine Empathy*, 282.

<sup>31</sup> Farley, *Divine Empathy*, 282.

<sup>32</sup> Farley, *Divine Empathy*, 283.

<sup>33</sup> Farley, *Divine Empathy*, 284.

In his being and ministry, Jesus manifested God in himself and revealed empathetic divine presence on earth. He felt for and with those oppressed in society and the world and those marginalized and unwelcome. Jesus did not separate himself from the pain and oppression of society and the world. His empathetic presence in his earthly ministry preceded the messianic, prophetic, and political purposes of his being.

Scripture shows Jesus' empathy as his motif for his ministry. The story of the death of Lazarus shows Jesus' empathetic heart. He responded to the tears of Lazarus' sisters with his heart. The Bible records the moment as follows: Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved (John 11:33)" and "wept (John 11:35, NIV)." He had the pain of losing his friend and felt together with those who mourned. His first response to Lazarus' death was to feel the sorrow of those mourning and reveal his empathetic presence at the moment. This empathetic response preceded his miraculous action to raise Lazarus from the dead. In addition, Jesus' healing ministry was possible not simply because he had the power to heal and cast out demons. That was also possible because he understood and shared with individuals and society the feeling of being rejected, isolated, unwelcome, marginalized, and unaccepted. Jesus had a heart for humanity. He also had a personal experience of rejection in his hometown (Matt. 13:57; Mark 6:3-4), even the threat of life (Luke 4:29). Jesus also wept over Jerusalem on his triumphant entry to the city (Luke 19:41). His mourning toward people and the city preceded his glorious resurrection defeating death. His empathetic response was followed by his salvific work. His heart for people and the world led him to endure even impending death and its emotional and physical pain. Jesus unquestionably showed an empathetic presence in human society.

*Empathetic Community with God and Jesus*

In the same line with Ruether's viewpoint, Asian feminist theological understanding considers Jesus' empathy a reason for Jesus' ministry. A considerable number of Asian Christian women have discovered God's compassionate presence, which shares their pain and attentively responds to their cries and voices.<sup>34</sup> This understanding portrays Jesus as "a compassionate mother" who deeply feels all human pain and suffering and weeps with humanity.<sup>35</sup>

In Asian feminist theology, Jesus' suffering with humanity demonstrates that Jesus is not one of the oppressors, the source of injustice and violence in society.<sup>36</sup> Lee Oo Chung, a Korean feminist theologian, points out that those who desire their own glory, honor, and power "could not feel the pain of the suffering poor nor see the violence and evil of the oppressors."<sup>37</sup> Jesus is on the other side with the oppressed—*minjung*, a Korean term meaning the masses.<sup>38</sup> Ruether also points out that Jesus was not one of the powerful and dominating; on the contrary, he became one of the poor and the powerless, even one of the dead, in order to witness to whom God's kingdom belongs.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 81.

<sup>35</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 64.

<sup>36</sup> Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Lee Oo Chung, "One Woman's Confession of Faith," in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, ed. John S. Pobee and Bäbel von Wartenberg-Potter (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1986), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Ruether, *To Change the World*, 18.

Chung Hyun Kyung, a Korean feminist theologian, describes that the masses' religions are not institutional, androcentric, and power-oriented; rather, *minjung* expresses vivid faith and daily struggles from their own lives in religions.<sup>40</sup> Dominant religions in Korea, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity, have supported the male-centered culture in society.<sup>41</sup> As a method of Christology, including the doctrine of the incarnation, Chung suggests attentive listening to people and their stories of struggles, including *han*, a Korean term, meaning a deep feeling from oppression and injustice. That is because the scriptural and dogmatic traditional approach of Christology is irrelevant to individuals and society in desperation.<sup>42</sup> Chung also asserts that "the mystery of incarnation" is experienced in Korean women's lives and struggles instead of being objectified.<sup>43</sup> In her understanding, regardless of whether the oppression is coming from a certain sin or a particular social structure, Jesus frees humanity from oppression by showing his empathetic presence and giving his whole self to *minjung*.

Chung's point is closely linked to Jesus' ministry to be with those on the street, not with those on the throne, or with power and authority. Jesus evidently expressed his empathetic presence in his life and ministry by being involved in *minjung*'s daily lives—sharing meals, spending time together, and listening to their voices. His empathetic heart is found in his teaching of parables for *minjung*, not in theological and political debates with scholars. That is also a reason that Jesus spoke in parables, as a teaching tool

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<sup>40</sup> Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 86.

<sup>42</sup> Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 104; Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 61.

considering the audience, in order to help them understand his main point easily. Jesus also regarded people as more important than any tradition and law. Therefore, he did not fear performing healing ministry on the Sabbath. He even scolded those who blamed his performance of healing on the Sabbath, saying, “Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water (Luke 13:15)?”

Ruether concludes her book, *To Change the World*, stating, “God’s Shalom is the nexus of authentic creational life that has to be reincarnated again and again in new ways and new contexts in each new generation.”<sup>44</sup> She suggests focusing on God’s Shalom through Jesus, who connects all of us and our beings in a new way.<sup>45</sup> What God has done in and through Jesus is not to divide and categorize society by using various socio-economic and political standards and authorities but to invite the world to experience being together with Jesus. Thus, the messianic hope is to be in peace and wholeness regardless of the individual and group’s social status and situation. That is also the reason that we can hold onto the hope of heaven in the midst of divisions and exclusion in society. From the viewpoint of empathy, God is understood as the one, who willingly and lovingly revealed God’s self in the form of flesh to teach, walk, and share the holy life among human beings on earth.

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<sup>44</sup> Ruether, *To Change the World*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> Ruether, *To Change the World*, 69.

## Conclusion

Incarnation is God's inevitable self-revelation and convenient initiative for humanity because of God's empathy toward humanity. This is God's most powerful and holy intervention in human history. As God empathetically revealed God's self in the form of human flesh as Jesus for humanity, Jesus showed his empathetic presence in his life and ministry, and presented God, invisible, to humanity. The one who suffered and died on the cross is the one who walked among the people, shared the meal with the sinners, offered the water of eternal life to the socially marginalized women, and invited all to God's table. God's self-revelation in Jesus enabled people to experience God *in* Jesus with their eyes, ears, and hands. Not possessing earthly power and authority, God incarnate exemplified an empathetic presence on earth for all human beings by mourning and suffering together and living as one of them and one of us.

Empathy is a significant feature of spiritual leadership, especially in faith communities. Jesus' empathetic leadership can be positively applied to cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry settings, in which leaders frequently have difficulty listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them, because of different racial, ethnical, and cultural backgrounds and language barriers. That is also because of noticeable cultural differences and anxiety resulting from the differences. A cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry is not about but beyond a particular culture and ethnicity. The inevitable incarnation and self-revelation of God in the life of Jesus exemplify empathetic leadership beyond social criteria and structure, including culture and ethnicity. Empathy willingly creates room in one's culture and life for others with an open heart and mind so

that the ministry resembles God's empathetic revelation and Jesus' empathetic presence through every part of the ministry of the church and leadership.

Empathy is a process of understanding God's heart in the incarnated history and Jesus's heart in the biblical stories. The Christian understanding of Jesus can never be separated from the inevitable empathetic revelation of God and the empathetic presence of Jesus. Understanding the incarnation through a lens of empathy allows leaders to strive to understand God's empathetic heart toward them and practice the same heart for others. It also leads them to be more empathetic in ministry as God first did, and Jesus also showed by listening to different voices and needs and embracing them in ministry.

For these reasons, this chapter attempts to support the hypothesis of training empathetic leadership through listening prayer by understanding the doctrine of the incarnation through the lens of empathy. This approach supports the need and power of empathetic leadership in a faith community through a practice of listening prayer as Christian life aims to understand God's heart and practice listening to God's voice. Thus, a theological understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation guides leaders to pay attention to various voices and embrace different needs in ministry.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Empathy is one of the subjects that has been deeply and widely researched in various academic and practical fields both in historical and contemporary periods. The profound interest that empathy has received from scholars and practitioners reveals that every part of human life requires an empathetic approach and involvement. Empathy has influenced literature, education, religion, psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, sociology, and communication, among others, over the centuries. Naturally, empathy has been extensively studied in interdisciplinary fields in recent decades, including biology, social, cognitive, and cognitive-affective neuroscience, cognitive and evolutionary psychology, and neuropsychology.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental idea in all fields is that empathy is considered a critical research topic and an inseparable factor in human and social development and socio-political trends.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, this social trend and historical trajectory reflect the significant and formative role of empathy and its considerable influence on human societies, cultures, and religious lives. In the same manner, it also shows that any form of society expects the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Decety and William Ickes, eds., *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, Social Neuroscience Series (Cambridge, MA: A Bradford Book, 2009), vii-viii, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/lib/dtl/reader.action?docID=3339007>.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 4.



positive effects and role of empathy in human life by sharing emotions among individuals and communities. Empathy is now used in daily lives to express human relationships with others despite the ambiguity and difficulty of understanding empathy.<sup>3</sup>

Among various academic research and practical fields, psychology dominantly studied empathy in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in the areas of counseling, psychotherapy, and social and developmental psychology.<sup>4</sup> Empathy is no longer regarded as an innate trait; rather, research indicates that it can be trainable and teachable.<sup>5</sup> Put differently, individuals can grow and nurture their empathy through certain forms of training and practice. Reflecting on the research, for example, empathy has been emphasized in various leadership training and development programs.

Carl Rogers, a renowned American psychologist in the twentieth century, developed the empathetic listening theory based on a person-centered approach. This theory introduces active listening theory, often called empathetic listening theory. It is a way to approach potential problems and ultimately change a listener's personality, fundamental attitude toward themselves, and way of understanding themselves, others, and the world.<sup>6</sup> The change also influences relationship attitudes with others and group development.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Changming Duan and Clara E. Hill, "The Current State of Empathy," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 43, no. 3 (July 1996): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.43.3.261>.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Riess, "The Science of Empathy," *Journal of Patient Experience* 4, no. 2 (June 2017): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2374373517699267>.

<sup>6</sup> Carl R. Rogers and Richard E. Farson, *Active Listening* (1957; repr., Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2015), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 3.

Rogers' empathetic listening theory closely interacts with the research project about training empathetic leadership through daily participation in listening prayer. The context of the project is Wesley United Methodist Church (UMC) in Vienna, Virginia. The problem present in the context is insufficient empathy in leadership. It is shown as difficulty of leadership to listen to various voices and perspectives. Without empathy, the church ministry includes only a partial voice of the congregation, rather than the voice, representing the entire community. This tendency leads the ministry to be influenced and shaped by only a small number of people, such as the pastor and selected lay leaders, whose voices are more cared for, concentrated, and powered in the church's general operation and ministry.

Rogers' empathetic listening theory supports the need and power of empathetic leadership in a ministry setting by training and developing empathetic listening skills for personal and group development. That is because empathetic leaders generate positive changes and influences for individuals, groups, and one's relationship with oneself and others, including God. This approach builds a foundation of the idea that empathetic listening is trainable and teachable through listening prayer, which is an intentional practice of listening attentively to the voice of God, understanding God's empathetic heart toward themselves, and becoming empathetic to themselves and others. By doing so, empathetic listening skills enable individuals to listen to other voices and embrace other needs in ministry.

This chapter argues that Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory is closely intertwined with the hypothesis of training empathetic leaders through listening prayer. This theory also strongly supports the biblical, historical, and theological foundations

developed as follows: Elijah's empathetic presence and interaction with the widow in 1 Kings 17:8-16, Korean Bible Women as spiritual leaders of prayer and empathy, and God's empathetic revelation in the doctrine of the incarnation. With the close interaction, empathetic listening theory sustains the significant need for empathetic leaders. The theory aims to achieve the project goal of training empathetic leadership by creating a rhythm of daily listening prayer.

### **Empathetic Listening Theory**

#### *Definition of Empathy*

Empathy is only a century-old term, coined in 1908. The word is rooted in *Einfühlung* in German, literally meaning "in-feeling."<sup>8</sup> The original term was used in art history to indicate an aesthetic activity expressing one's feelings into certain shapes and forms.<sup>9</sup> The field of psychology defines empathy as "the objective awareness of another person's thoughts and feelings and their possible meaning."<sup>10</sup> In history, however, the meaning of empathy was never simple; it has developed and been redefined for specific research and projects over the years.<sup>11</sup> Because of the aforementioned issue, Susan Lanzoni, a contemporary historian of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience, posits that the definition and understanding of empathy have been developed along with the

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<sup>8</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond J. Corsini, *The Dictionary of Psychology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 8.

social, historical, and intellectual movement between two ends from various perspectives, such as (un)similarity, (un)familiarity, and (un)belonging.<sup>12</sup> In all fields and circumstances, empathy enables one to extend oneself and become something else by crossing the border between oneself and the other, whether it is an object or a human being.<sup>13</sup>

Empathy is often misunderstood or conflated with other similar concepts or emotions, such as sympathy, compassion, and mercy. To delve further into the similarities and differences between these concepts, in psychology, the definition of sympathy is “sensitive appreciation or emotional concern for and the sharing of the mental and emotional state of another person or animal or of a group.”<sup>14</sup> Compassion is defined as “a strong feeling of sympathy for another person’s feelings, or a strong feeling of sympathy for others in their sufferings.”<sup>15</sup> Mercy is widely considered not a psychological term but a theological, biblical, and religious term. It implies one’s compassionate feeling for another, but it primarily refers to God’s divine mercy toward humanity for forgiveness.<sup>16</sup> All the terms sound mostly similar and slightly distinctive. However, all of them mean a personal feeling for someone or something. Still, sympathy and empathy are often used in a confusing way; but empathy implies a more powerful

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<sup>12</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *The Dictionary of Psychology*, 969.

<sup>15</sup> *The Dictionary of Psychology*, 194.

<sup>16</sup> Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 2nd ed. s.v. “mercy,” accessed December 28, 2022 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), <https://search-ebscohost-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=780304&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

and deeper interaction with one's feelings, not limited to pity that sympathy commonly describes.<sup>17</sup>

This chapter argues that empathy is more than just an emotional state or status. Rather, it signifies interactions with the other party or actors. Put differently, empathy is and should be understood as a relational term, focusing primarily on human responses, rather than immediate emotions or feelings. Because of that interactive and interrelated attribute of empathy, empathy always needs at least two parties—one who responds and the other to be responded. This viewpoint is not limited to an interpersonal relationship but extended to a divine relationship with God.

### *Empathetic Listening Theory as a Problem Solution*

Carl Rogers made a remarkable contribution to psychology and psychotherapy largely by developing a person-centered, in other words, client-centered approach. This approach is rooted in “relationship therapy,” developed in the 1930s by Jessie Taft, a social worker.<sup>18</sup> Taft was aware of the importance of recognizing personal feelings, and the empathetic personal engagement of a therapist in a client's experience and feelings.<sup>19</sup> In 1940, when Rogers first presented this approach, it was considered revolutionary and an attack on more traditional therapeutic methods, which focused on advice-giving and problem-solving.<sup>20</sup> Under this traditional framework, patients were largely placed in a

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<sup>17</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 127; Brian Thorn and Pete Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 3rd ed., Key Figures in Counselling and Psychotherapy, ed. Windy Dryden (London, United Kingdom: SAGE Publications, 2013), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 142-43.

<sup>20</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 12-13.

passive role in the given time and setting, while therapists intended a certain direction to handle a specific situation or problem. Rather than seeing a person as a problematic or sick object, Rogers first and deliberately used the term “client” rather than “patient.” This shows his willingness to express respect to the person and to share power to lead together at a given time.<sup>21</sup> He also used the new term “person-centered” because he hoped and expected that his approach could be applied in a variety of contexts beyond the fields of counseling and psychotherapy.<sup>22</sup> His focus was to help clients to understand themselves better and grow further as a whole person instead of cognitively recognizing a situation.<sup>23</sup>

Rogers published a book, *On Becoming a Person*, in 1961 from a person-centered perspective. This book proved that his approach was positively applied in many people’s daily lives beyond the institutional system and a therapy room.<sup>24</sup> The concept of person-centered therapy now indubitably frames every therapeutic approach, even though its influence is not clearly noted.<sup>25</sup> Along with congruence and acceptance, Rogers asserts empathy for therapeutic change. The approach is about seeing and understanding the clients’ feelings, situations, and circumstances through the clients’ eyes.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, Rogers developed the idea of active listening. Active listening, also known as “empathetic listening,” is an act of getting inside the speaker, understanding from the speaker’s perspective, and catching not only contents and feelings, but also

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<sup>21</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 36.

meaning in them.<sup>27</sup> Rogers understood empathetic listening as a problem solution—that is, by being listened to, a speaker confronts and solves his/her own problems.<sup>28</sup> The goal of empathetic listening is to create changes in people.<sup>29</sup> As clinical evidence and research proved, Rogers believed that active listening has the most powerful influence to change one's personality and develop a group.<sup>30</sup> His approach was possible because of his belief that each person is worthy and capable enough to move forward on his/her own.<sup>31</sup>

Empathetic listening does not require a lengthy time, but it brings out a decisive outcome as a problem solution. That is because empathetic listening allows an environment and technique where a speaker is genuinely respected, listened to, and appreciated, and even unclear feelings and meanings are fully delivered and understood by the listener.<sup>32</sup> Empathetic listening enables people to change their views and thoughts toward themselves and others and their fundamental values and thoughts.<sup>33</sup> It also enables people to be more emotionally mature.<sup>34</sup> In a group setting, listening reduces the chances of argument, criticism, and defense; it increases a democratic and cooperative atmosphere.<sup>35</sup> In his theory, Rogers clearly points out empathetic listening as a skill,

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<sup>27</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 4.

which implies its trainability using specific techniques. He emphasizes that a listener's attitudes should be: (1) listening for meaning, not only content, (2) responding to feelings, (3) reading nonverbal language, and (4) avoiding pressures for decisions, judgments, and evaluations.<sup>36</sup> That means being free from external factors; instead, fully focusing on the one who speaks so that the one's voice is fully heard and understood by a listener. These attitudes maximize one's potential for change and problem-solving.

### *Empathetic Listening to God*

Empathy is not only a psychological concept for a better understanding of humanity but also a driving force for good human interactions and a touchstone for a matured spiritual community that enables individuals and communities to build authentic and intimate relationships with divine and human figures in individual and communal lives on a daily basis. A score of psychological studies show that empathy is not simply an innate trait but something can be taught and nurtured.<sup>37</sup> It means individuals can learn, grow, and nurture their empathy through training and practice.

Rogers' person-centered approach and empathetic listening theory are applicable in a spiritual formation that centers on God's heart, not one's own heart, and listens to God's voice, not one's own voice. Listening prayer is also a change of perspective—from talking to listening, from supplication to discernment, and from asking for needs to asking for guidance. Therefore, listening prayer is a practice of God-centered life and ministry.

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<sup>36</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 6-10.

<sup>37</sup> Helen Riess, "The Science of Empathy," 74.



As Rogers experienced and practiced in his field, empathetic listening can be taught through the practice of listening prayer. Through learning and practice, people can listen more and be more empathetic to themselves and others. People can listen more to God by practicing and studying active listening. As prayer is not simply about talking to the divine subject, listening is as important as talking to God. Considering the relational and reciprocal activity in prayer between God and humans, this is the highest level of understanding God and listening to the voice of God. It is not too much to say that listening enables humans to reduce the emotional distance between them and the divine figure by understanding God at a more profound and embodied level. This process is a transformative progress from human recognition of divinity into a personal experience of divine presence in the heart. This can also be understood as a spiritual movement “from head to heart.”

Although he turned away from Christianity and the Church, Rogers’ religious background and beliefs apparently influenced his viewpoint and approach to a human as a psychological and spiritual object and human’s spiritual well-being.<sup>38</sup> Brian Thorne points out God’s mysterious movement in and through Rogers’ life.<sup>39</sup> One of his colleagues, Elizabeth Sheerer, addressed that although Rogers did not formally mention it, Christianity had a deep influence on his theory and its development.<sup>40</sup> Rogers’ life and understanding of divinity and humanity may be interpreted from the perspective of Barbour’s dialogue model as he denied the institutional religious system at one point.

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<sup>38</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, xiv-xv.

<sup>39</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, xiv.

<sup>40</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 23.

However, Rogers' report from his later years shows his recognition and acceptance of a sense of mystery and belonging to something larger.<sup>41</sup> His strict Christian background in childhood and his path to ministry in his twenties undoubtedly influenced his identity, interests, and viewpoint in understanding humans and human relationships. God was obviously excluded from Rogers' research. Nevertheless, his scientific approaches and practices undoubtedly reformed his own understanding of God and humanity. His scientific experiences reformulated his thoughts about God and religion. It is also evident that his personal beliefs and experiences, regardless of whether they were publicly presented from the Christian perspective or not, enabled his person-centered theory and empathetic listening to be accepted and embedded in various spiritual traditions in other religions.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, Rogers' original intention can be understood as the dialogue model at first; but it has contributed to psychological and religious fields as the integration model of Barbour's scientific model to understand the relation of science and religion. In the same manner, empathetic listening enables individuals and communities to understand and experience God at a deeper level; thus, the integration model is engaged in this approach to further develop empathetic listening to God through listening prayer.

### *The Implication of Empathetic Listening Theory in Ecclesiology and Ministry*

Ecclesiology invites everyone to become the Church, the Body of Christ. This doctrine is premised on the intellectual recognition of diversity in the institutional and

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<sup>41</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 120.

<sup>42</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 121.

organic community and fully accepting the differences as part of the self. In other words, “being the Church” includes cognitive and emotional empathy. The frame of empathy enables full acceptance—a radical act of the human heart as well as an active action of the human mind. With this understanding, relationships among different individuals are based not simply on knowing others’ differences and challenges but more on putting oneself entirely into others’ shoes. Therefore, in a relationship based on empathy, no one is separated from the other. This is also related to understanding the Church as the Body of Christ, in which every part is closely connected and influenced by other parts, as Paul pleaded to the community in Corinth (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

This perspective unmistakably echoes Carl Rogers’ opinion about different values and beliefs of individuals and religions. Since he lived in China for six months in college, Rogers intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually experienced a change of personal understanding toward different perceptions and religious beliefs.<sup>43</sup> His time as a professional psychologist at Rochester in New York proved to him that it is not the therapist, but the client, who leads the direction of therapy and proceeds it.<sup>44</sup> His cultural immersion and realizations over the years led him to spend his seventies and eighties heavily involved in world peace and teaching and serving beyond cultural and racial differences.<sup>45</sup> While visiting those countries going through daily conflicts and tensions, he offered seminars and workshops to help them to understand and respond to each other

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<sup>43</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 20.

from a person-centered perspective.<sup>46</sup> Rogers' research and practical actions were undoubtedly caused by his empathy toward others and the world that all, including himself, were closely linked and influenced by each other. He truly practiced his theory and brought out personal and worldwide changes outside of the walls of institutions and familiar cultures and traditions. His person-centered work outside a therapy or research room can be understood as a missional work for God's Shalom—dwelling in heavenly peace and striving to bring unity in Christ in our time and place.

Rogers' person-centered approach and empathetic listening theory can be applied in a ministry setting, especially, for leaders in a cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry setting, where differences in the community often cause anxiety and conflicts. He did not deny differences in society and the world. He also had a true heart—emotional empathy that led him to take action for others and the world. It is scientifically proved that humans are naturally aware of and respond to differences; humans can subconsciously feel fear when social and cultural differences are recognized.<sup>47</sup> Helen Riess argues that cognitive empathy should function when emotional empathy is lacking because of differences based on race, ethnicity, religion, and physical condition.<sup>48</sup> Rogers and Riess' approaches seem distinctive from each other as the former is based on psychology and the latter on science. Yet, both support the point that empathy is necessary for a setting where differences exist, and that empathy is possible regardless of visible and invisible differences.

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<sup>46</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Helen Riess, "The Science of Empathy," 75.

<sup>48</sup> Helen Riess, "The Science of Empathy," 75.

As examined so far, the focus of the project is to discuss, practice, and implement listening prayer of lay leadership. The empathetic listening theory supports the idea that when participants intentionally listen to another voice, the action of listening leads the participants to be empathetic and have a better relationship with others. Rogers claims that “listening is a growth experience.”<sup>49</sup> He also asserts that “active listening aims to bring about change in people.”<sup>50</sup> Listening is not the end of one’s action. Listening is not the ultimate goal of one’s life and a church’s ministry. Rather, listening enables a continuance of positive changes in oneself and one’s relationships with others, including divine existence.

That is, empathy enables the Church to have a contextual and relevant approach to individuals and communities, being grounded on intellectual recognition and complete acceptance of differences beyond age, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, marital status, and disability. Empathy leads individuals to have ‘we’-centered ministry instead of ‘me’-centered ministry. Empathy motivates individual Christians and the Church to be more eager to be like Christ, embracing all, understanding deeply about God’s heart, listening more to God’s voice, and pursuing the ministry of the Body of Christ that celebrates all different parts of the

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<sup>49</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 5

community. Empathetic listening has the power to enable differences to be respected and welcomed and eventually to become one with God, whose voice should be heard.

### **Analytical Lens of Empathetic Listening Theory**

#### *Elijah's Empathetic Listening in 1 Kings 17:8-16*

Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory undergirds Elijah's spiritual leadership style, which is found in 1 Kings 17:8-16: the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. In the Scripture, Elijah's identity is seen largely from three different aspects: (1) a person of God, (2) a person of prayer, and (3) a person of empathy. This approach supports the need and power of listening prayer of lay leaders in a local church to embrace various voices and needs in ministry.

First, Elijah's faithful obedience to God's Word (1 Kings 17:3-5) enabled him to experience God's provision in his desperation and become a channel to reveal God's provision to the widow in the same situation. The chosen miraculous story led the widow to expect and experience the power of "a man of God" when her son was dead and revived (1 Kings 17:18, 24). Elijah was attuned and faithfully responsive to God's voice. This example points to whose voice needs to be listened to in the research project—God.

Second, Elijah is seen as a symbolic figure of a prayerful prophet. The chosen Scripture shows an example of Elijah's listening prayer as he listened to God's Word and delivered it to the widow. His prophetic role was only possible when he listened to God's voice and discerned God's will. The Letter of James points out Elijah as an example of powerful prayer even though he was "a human being like us (James 5:17)." This teaches

Christians in the ancient and current church that the power of prayer does not come from one's status, but from one's righteousness. This approach invites a life of prayer for all who have a desire for God and all who are eager to come close to God.

Lastly, Elijah shows his empathetic leadership style by wholeheartedly suffering together and sharing lives with the widow. He recognized the widow's fear of starvation (1 Kings 17:13) and tragic pain from the loss of her son (1 Kings 17:20). Elijah had nothing in common with the widow except for their social status as a minority and scarcity in the chosen text. He demonstrates that an empathetic relationship can be created beyond socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic differences. His empathetic response to the widow was possible because he first experienced God's empathetic care toward him, and he could have the same heart toward the widow, reflecting on how God would view and care for her. As the empathetic listening theory suggests, Elijah did not see the widow with his eyes, but from her eyes. Later, he saw her as God would.

This perspective proves that Elijah was a righteous person who prayed to listen to the voice of God, understand God's heart better, and demonstrate God's empathetic heart toward others through his life and ministry. His interaction with the widow of Zarephath demonstrates that empathetic leadership is applicable regardless of social, cultural, and ethnic differences. He exemplifies empathetic leadership in a personal relationship. The Scripture also informs the potential ways that the empathetic listening theory can be applied in a cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry that requires more openness and understanding, and less judgment and criticism. Elijah in the Scripture coincides with Rogers' empathetic listening theory about what to do and avoid as a listener.

*Korean Bible Women as Spiritual Leaders of Prayer and Empathy*

Korean Bible Women, also known as *chōndo puin* in Korean, demonstrate the need and power of empathetic spiritual leadership. They were indigenous female evangelists who sacrificed and dedicated themselves to the rapid development of Korean Christianity from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The majority of the Bible Women were marginalized socially, economically, and culturally. Despite their social, economic, and cultural limitations, the Bible Women developed and revealed their identity as spiritual leaders, based on prayer and empathy, for the socially disrespected and neglected and the physically and culturally isolated.

At the same time when the Bible Women engaged in mission work, the Korean society was predominantly androcentric, elite-driven, and wealth-centered. It was when Korean society was considerably segregated from the viewpoint of class, gender, and age. Naturally, various forms of social oppression prevailed and persisted. In the social and cultural discriminative atmosphere, the Bible Women's leadership influenced every part of the mission and ministry and every corner of the country. They brought their personal stories with the good news of the Bible and valued and embraced everyone as a part of the Church regardless of their social status and past.<sup>51</sup> The Bible Women's personal pain and vulnerability from abusive and disenfranchised backgrounds empowered other women to overcome their own life tribulations in faith.<sup>52</sup>

According to Carl Rogers, empathetic listening theory implies *active* participation and responsibility to comprehend information and feelings of one who talks and to help

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<sup>51</sup> Lee-Ellen Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success: Using the *Anbang* Network and the Religious Authority of the *Mudang*," *Journal of Korean Religions* 3, no.1 (April 2012): 118.

<sup>52</sup> Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 118.



the one to solve one's problems by listening.<sup>53</sup> The Bible Women were not reluctant to take action for others. They visited isolated and distanced regions on foot. They also entered men-restricted, mistress' spaces to evangelize, educate, and empower other women. It evidently shows the Bible Women's self-giving sacrifices and empathetic hearts for other individuals and groups.

The Bible Women's sacrificial devotion to the dramatic spiritual awakening in the socially isolated individuals and groups in Korean society was first indebted to the missionaries who did not judge them by social class, wealth, gender, age, marital status, and the past. While Korean society devalued widowed and uneducated women, missionaries welcomed, trained, and empowered the Bible Women. Furthermore, these foreign missionaries valued the Bible Women's marginalized status and availability as important assets to reach out to the physically isolated locations and those whose social status was as low as theirs.<sup>54</sup> In the missionaries' treatment of the Bible Women, Rogers' emphasis on the ideal listener's attitude is found—no pressing decisions, judgments, and evaluation.<sup>55</sup> Missionaries' empathy allowed marginalized individuals and groups from all aspects of society to value themselves and play a remarkable role in others' lives so that they personally experienced the full acceptance and respect of others and deeply

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<sup>53</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> K. Kale Yu, *Understanding Korean Christianity: Grassroot Perspectives on Causes, Culture, and Responses* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 165.

<sup>55</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 6-10.

understood God's universal love and saving work beyond social categories and limitations.

When social structure and culture did not welcome them, missionaries granted the Bible Women a new identity as spiritual leaders. Borrowing Rogers' approach, this is a personal experience and subjective awareness that one is worthy enough for deep respect.<sup>56</sup> Through missionaries' heartfelt trust and respect, the Bible Women began to realize their wholeness as a person and fully experienced God's empathy toward them. Their personal experiences of pain, suffering, and oppression in society and God's empathy led them to see others through empathetic eyes and value others as they were valued by missionaries. Because of this, Thorne reapproaches Rogers' emphasis on empathy, saying that "empathy is in itself a powerful healing agent."<sup>57</sup> The Bible Women's spiritual leadership is an example of Rogers' approach—one's personal experiences of being respected and understood lead oneself to be more trustworthy.<sup>58</sup> Empathy healed the brokenness of the Bible Women in the society and made them whole in the knowledge and practice of the gospel in God.

### *God's Empathetic Revelation in the Doctrine of the Incarnation*

The doctrine of the incarnation is God's inevitable self-revelation out of God's empathy toward human beings. God's embodiment in human flesh is the most powerful proof of God's empathetic intervention in human life for salvation. This approach and

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<sup>56</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 39.

<sup>58</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 26.

Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory suggest a lens through which to understand and experience the nature and work of God revealed in the person of Jesus on a personal level. This lens of understanding God is essential to understanding humanity because the relationship between the Creator and creatures is inseparable. This relational perspective further allows us to understand the incarnate God and humanity—not about the work of God through Jesus on the cross, but about the nature of God embodied in the form of human flesh in Jesus Christ.

Rogers understands that empathetic listening is about understanding *what is spoken* and *what is attempted to be delivered* in the client's inner world.<sup>59</sup> He also emphasizes the significance of listening and understanding the whole language, expressed by the entire human body, including, but not limited to, tone and volume of voice, facial expressions, posture, and breathing.<sup>60</sup> That is, empathetic listening is a progressive act of understanding the seen and unseen, the spoken and unspoken, and the revealed and unrevealed in the scene and setting. This means using all human senses to understand one who needs to be listened to.

By revealing God's self in the form of flesh, Jesus Christ, God physically came close to human beings. Knowing the person of God is not only about intellectual knowledge of the divine figure, but about personal acceptance of God into human life, including mind, heart, and soul. God's self-revelation in human flesh enabled humanity to encounter God with human senses and experience God at a close distance. Donald M. Baillie points out that Jesus reveals "a seeking God," who preveniently goes out to find a

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<sup>59</sup> Thorn and Sanders, *Carl Rogers*, 44.

<sup>60</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 9-10.

lost sheep in the wilderness.<sup>61</sup> He understands that instead of waiting to be found, called, and visited, God in the Bible takes action to reveal God's self, and call, meet, and visit people, even those who flee from God.<sup>62</sup> It is evident that God always acts in and for human life, as biblical stories and Christian history support.

Likewise, the invisible God was seen in the body of Jesus Christ. Through the embodiment of God in the form of humanity, God's empathetic presence was shown in Jesus' whole life and ministry. Being born in a weak and fragile condition shows that living a full-human life is part of God's divine plan for human salvation. Growing just like all human beings is necessary because the incarnation is not only for saving humanity from sin and death, but for living together and revealing God's self in people's everyday lives as an empathetic leader.

Through his life and teaching, Jesus suggests the image of an empathetic community as the goal of faith communities. Not only through his words, but also through his actions, he shared the feeling of being rejected, isolated, and unwelcome; and he invited outcasts into his arms, heart, and life. As the Epistle to the Hebrews proclaims, this is a Christian belief that Jesus has an empathetic heart with human weaknesses and goes through human temptations with us even though he has no sin (Heb. 4:15). By choosing to live on the side of the powerless, Jesus suggested a world with God that frees from dividing people, based on social categories; instead, that invites all, regardless of the individual and group's social status and situation. This belief is shared at the holy table—

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<sup>61</sup> Donald M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London, United Kingdom: Faber Paperbacks, 1977), 63.

<sup>62</sup> Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 64.

“By your Spirit, make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.”<sup>63</sup> The table of Jesus Christ has the power to embrace all in his ministry.

Understanding the incarnation through the lens of empathy brings hope to local churches, particularly a cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry setting that mirrors a divided society. That is because empathy enables people to see individuals and the world through God’s eyes, discover signs of God’s self-giving love in others and the world, and grow more like God by understanding and experiencing God’s empathetic heart more deeply. Differences have no power; instead, differences are welcomed and embraced for a better community, resembling God’s heart, revealed in the body of Jesus. This empathetic approach enables people to understand God’s empathetic heart, prominently revealed in the embodiment in human flesh, Jesus’ empathetic presence in human life, and strive to create a community of empathy that God showed and taught through the incarnation, God’s inevitable self-revelation for humanity out of God’s empathy. Empathetic listening would be the first step for God’s Shalom because it allows people to understand God’s empathetic heart toward themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Carl Rogers’ empathetic listening theory has a foundation of a person-centered approach that sees a person in a given time and setting and allows the person to actively lead and proceed in the given situation. The role of the listener is to listen attentively to the one who speaks without judgment and evaluation. Rogers’ approach, influenced by

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<sup>63</sup> United Methodist Publishing House, “A Service of Word and Table I,” *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 38.

relationship therapy, implies a relationship between two objects—person/client and counselor/therapist. The empathetic listening theory is about a listener and a speaker—what empathetic listening is about and what impacts listening skills bring out in oneself and one's relationship with the one who listens. This viewpoint is found in all the previously described foundations as follows.

The biblical foundations based on 1 Kings 17:8-16 include the interaction between Elijah and God, and between Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. The historical foundations of Korean Bible Women contain various interactions between the Bible Women and God, missionaries, and other marginalized individuals and groups. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in this chapter, this approach could also contain relationships among the Bible Women—how they empowered each other and how they changed by each other. The theological foundations of the doctrine of incarnation show a relational interpretation between God and Jesus, God in Jesus and human beings, and Jesus and human beings.

Those organically related relationships prove the influence of a relationship on other relationship(s). The relationships in the biblical and historical foundations address that by understanding God's empathetic heart toward themselves in an intimate relationship with God, they became empathetic to others. Understanding God's empathetic heart toward themselves led them to grow and reveal spiritual leadership based on empathy. Their own spiritual awakening and growth are irresistible because that is the power of empathy. As Rogers considers empathetic listening theory a problem solution, people change when they are listened to and when they listen to God and an

empathetic leader. God in human flesh provides the most powerful example of God's unavoidable empathetic revelation and presence in human life.

Likewise, the three specific foundations integrated with Rogers' empathetic listening theory prove that despite cultural and ethnic differences, even the distance between heaven and earth, God's empathetic heart can embrace all individuals from different backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities. All of these are possible first when one knows who God is and accepts God's empathy toward oneself. Empathy enables one to extend oneself and cross the border between oneself and other(s).<sup>64</sup> Difference is irrelevant when empathy leads a relationship and suggests a viewpoint of oneness. The empathy-led situation shows a glimpse of God's Shalom community that all are invited to dream and join.

Those foundations also support that listening expands one's life. Empathetic listening skill is an essential and fundamental attitude of leaders who are called to continuously discern God's will and are attuned to God's voice. Without listening, leaders become more power-oriented, argumentative, critical, and defensive.<sup>65</sup> They do not open themselves to any changes. Empathetic listening asks listeners to deliberately avoid the action of decision, judgment, and evaluation.<sup>66</sup> Utilizing the empathetic listening skill also implies that listeners should not hastily and carelessly judge God's will and plan, based on their own experiences and knowledge. When church leaders

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<sup>64</sup> Lanzoni, *Empathy*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Rogers and Farson, *Active Listening*, 7.

become active listeners, they no longer see differences in the community as problems; instead, they see each other as part of God's Church, one Body in Christ.

Drawing upon Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory and its approach, the interdisciplinary foundations assert the need and power of listening prayer of lay leaders in a local church to listen to and embrace different voices and needs in ministry. This approach has two main points. First, empathy is teachable, trainable, and improvable by developing a rhythm of listening prayer in one's life. Second, prayer enables one to be empathetic toward themselves and others by understanding God's heart better and by listening to the voice and heart of God more attentively. This approach supports the research project about listening prayer of lay leadership in local churches, especially in a cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry setting, where an empathetic leader is more often needed due to anxiety and conflict caused by visible and invisible differences in the community. Therefore, a psychological understanding of empathy and Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory can be understood as a key to grow empathetic listening leaders.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **PROJECT ANALYSIS**

This project originated from my experiences and observations within a local church context, revealing a deficient empathy in the congregation's approach to ministry. The church leadership struggled with effectively listening to others' voices and embracing others' needs in ministry. Additionally, there was a failure to foster a culture where prayer is the cornerstone of the church mission and ministries. This oversight is often because of the underestimation of prayer's importance in the midst of busyness to handle and address daily tasks and produce immediate results. An insufficiency in empathy has led to challenges for the congregation in genuinely listening to diverse voices and perspectives. Without empathetic listening, the leadership fails to represent all members of the congregation, leaving the needs and voices of many unacknowledged and unaddressed in ministry efforts.

This problem of insufficient empathy was particularly evident at Wesley United Methodist Church (UMC) in Vienna, Virginia. The congregation felt that their direct requests were overlooked and not reflected in ministry decisions. In addition, the leadership did not openly share essential information, such as church finance, nor did they create an open space and channel for listening to the congregation's concerns, questions, and needs. A potential solution can start with the practice of listening prayer, shifting the focus of the church mission and ministries from the voice of selected leaders

to that of the entire congregation. This approach—practice of listening prayer—can serve as a transformative tool, creating a sacred space for listening to, acknowledging, and addressing diverse needs within ministry.

Christian faith journey aspires to be more like Jesus, known for his empathetic spiritual leadership. Congregants expect their church to embody Jesus' leadership style, embracing all human emotions and loving all humanity, even unto death. Empathy stands as a critical trait and source for developing spiritual leaders who understand God's heart toward and for humanity. Listening prayer emerges as a vital spiritual tool to help leaders to understand God's empathetic heart, listen to the voice of God, and discern and pursue God's will in ministry. Four foundations undergird the need for empathetic leadership in the local church, advocating for the incorporation of listening prayer to train and nurture empathetic leadership. They support the project of training empathetic leadership through listening prayer, mainly focusing on lay leadership in a local church setting, to ensure a broad range of voices and perspectives are considered in ministry.

This approach to empathetic leadership is grounded in four foundational aspects: biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary. They include (1) the story of Elijah and the widow in Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8-16; (2) the Korean Bible Women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; (3) the doctrine of the incarnation, reflecting God's empathy through self-revelation; and (4) Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory, also known as active listening theory.

This project, born out of the observed insufficient empathy at Wesley UMC, aims to educate on and implement listening prayer to cultivate empathetic leadership. It emphasizes the significance of empathy in church ministry and leadership. The focus is

on expanding the ministry's center from the pastor and lay leaders to the entire congregation, centering on God and fostering empathetic leadership through listening prayer.

This chapter describes a research project of a seven-week prayer study designed for a small group of six to nine individuals in lay leadership roles at Wesley UMC. The objective is to cultivate empathetic leadership through listening prayer, highlighting empathy's pivotal role in church ministry. The project hypothesized that if lay leaders learn and practice listening prayer in their daily lives, it will enhance their empathy by listening more attentively to others' voices and needs and embracing them in their ministry work. The anticipated outcome includes a leadership that not only embodies empathy within itself but also extends it to others within the church, actively listening to diverse voices and addressing varied needs. This training in empathetic leadership through listening prayer is envisioned to align leadership with God's vision, fostering continuous engagement with and discernment of God's will.

## **Methodology**

### *Project Setting: An In-Person Small Group Study*

The project was designed as a small group study to foster empathetic leadership by helping participants learn and practice listening prayer. The choice of a small group study format was deliberate, driven by several key considerations. First, a small group creates a space for participants to share their thoughts and experiences of listening prayer more openly throughout the project. The intimate nature of a small group setting

promotes stronger interpersonal connections with each other. An additional advantage of the small group setting is more impactful conversations and discussions, which are crucial for the project's interactive and dynamic requirements. Unlike traditional one-way communication, such as preaching and lectures, this format—the small group dynamic—encourages and promotes a network of personal relationships among participants and builds a sense of community.

Further, the in-person setting was conducted for the small group study to provide participants with a shared physical space and atmosphere. This setting enabled the participants to perceive and interpret nonverbal language and helped them build long-lasting personal connections. The significance of the in-person setting extended beyond the structured hour of learning and praying each week; it encompassed the informal time spent together before and after the main session. In comparison to virtual settings, the in-person format mitigated potential distractions such as household noises, technical glitches, and the presence of family members or pets.

Moreover, the in-person setting harnessed the natural utilization of all five senses, facilitating a more immersive and holistic learning experience. The need to regulate sound and video, inherent in virtual settings, was obviated. This deliberate setting enhanced the participants' ability to concentrate, learn, and cultivate their thoughts with minimal distractions and an environment conducive to focus. Likewise, the in-person setting fostered a sense of community and belonging, as participants shared the allocated time and personal stories within the same physical space and atmosphere.

*Qualitative Research Methodology*

The project employed a qualitative research methodology, given the limitations of quantitative data in assessing the impact of listening prayer on empathetic leadership development. This project, focusing on the impact of listening prayer on the development of empathetic leadership, demanded an approach that delved into personal subjective experiences and thoughts, which quantitative measures could not adequately capture. Qualitative data, derived from written and verbal descriptions, consequently, emerged as the most suitable means for evaluating the influence of listening prayer on empathetic leadership training.

Quantitative metrics, such as the Likert scale, were deemed inadequate for capturing the complex aspects of empathy and individual prayer experiences. Attempts to compare individual prayer lives and spirituality as benchmarks for empathy yielded inconclusive and inherently limited results. Therefore, the study avoided measuring prayer duration and frequency, acknowledging these metrics' inability to gauge empathy levels.

Similarly, demographic information, including age, gender, ethnicity, and religious background, was not considered influential to the study's focus on empathy and leadership. Anticipated indicators of project efficacy encompassed shifts in participants' perspectives on prayer, a more engaged approach to prayer, and the cultivation of empathetic leadership traits. Expected behavioral changes included attentiveness to others' voices and a heightened responsiveness to others' needs. It would be shown when the leaders design events and programs, discuss church business, and make decisions for ministry. Another indicator would be whether the participants learn how to listen to the

voice of God and discern God's will for their lives individually and for ministry collectively.

Data collection utilized three methodologies: pre-project and post-project surveys, group discussions, and focused individual interviews. These methods were complemented by supplementary data obtained through my personal notetaking during sessions, capturing spontaneous conversations, questions, and responses. The participants were given journals for personal reflection, not for data collection but as a tool for personal reflection on prayer practices not only in group sessions but also in personal lives. The purpose of journaling was explicitly communicated to the participants, encouraging them to articulate and refine their thoughts throughout the project freely. Throughout the sessions, open-ended questions were strategically asked for participants' reflections on prayer practice in their daily lives. A diverse array of questions and discussions were organically integrated into group interactions, generating additional qualitative data that supported the overarching objectives of the project.

#### *First Method: Pre-project and Post-project Surveys*

The initial phase of the research intervention involved conducting a pre-project survey during the first session, which followed a brief introduction to the project and an opening prayer. The purpose of this initial step was to gather unbiased baseline data, free from any influence the subsequent phases of the project might impart. The pre-project survey consisted of general open-ended questions, with each question intentionally crafted to serve a specific purpose, as delineated below. Table 2 displays the questions and corresponding purposes for the pre-project and post-project surveys.

Table 2. Pre-project and Post-project Survey Questions and Purposes

	Questions	Purposes
1	In your own words, how would you describe the definition of prayer?	To gauge the participants' own understanding of prayer.
2	In what ways can church leaders encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer?	To assess the participants' perceptions of the church's prayer ministry and their role within it as church leaders.
3	In what ways have church leaders failed to encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer?	To identify the weakness of the church's prayer ministry from the church leaders' perspective.
4	What are the benefits of having others share with church leaders the particular of their prayers?	To assess the participants' involvement with others in the communal prayer life.
5	In what cases do church leaders experience the significance of listening in ministry?	To determine the participants' understanding and experiences of the importance of listening in ministry.
6	What does God have to say about church leaders listening to others and God's voice?	To evaluate the participants' intellectual, spiritual, and theological insights into listening within the ministry.
7	What are the benefits of listening to others and God's voice in church ministry?	To probe the participants' recognition of the need for listening in ministry, encompassing divine and human communication, and the anticipated outcomes.

The survey process was meticulously handled during the pre-project and post-project survey phases to ensure the integrity and anonymity of participants' responses while allowing for individual response comparisons between pre-project and post-project responses. Completed pre-project surveys were sealed individually, with each participant's name affixed to the envelope for the confidentiality of their responses. The identical questions were asked at the post-project survey conducted during the final session. The confidentiality protocol extended to the post-project survey. Each participant was provided with their sealed pre-project survey and a new envelope for the post-project

survey. To protect anonymity, envelopes marked with participants' names were subsequently discarded.

Upon completion of the post-project survey, the participants were instructed to place both the pre-project and post-project surveys into a new envelope, at this time, without including their names. This procedure ensured that the data remained anonymous, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of changes in each participant's thoughts, attitudes, and reflections throughout the project without revealing individual identities.

Crucially, the envelopes, including both surveys, remained sealed until the conclusion of the Focused Individual Interviews to restrain any potential bias in the research process. This confidentiality protocol was crucial to maintaining the data's integrity and fostering an environment of trust and openness among the participants, thus encouraging honest self-assessment and reflection on their spiritual development throughout the project.

### *Second Method: Group Discussion*

The final session included a twenty-minute group discussion that provided a collaborative forum for the participants to share insights and experiences, thus fostering collective understanding and growth. This group setting was instrumental in facilitating the exchange of ideas, which not only enhanced the overall learning experience but also solidified the project's objectives. Table 3 below provides the discussion questions and their corresponding purposes.



Table 3. Group Discussion Questions and Purposes

	Questions	Purposes
1	How helpful or informative did you find today or through the project for your prayer life?	To evaluate the participants' personal experiences throughout the project and the participants' self-assessment in terms of their spiritual development.
2	What tools have you gained today or through the project for your prayer life?	To identify any change in the participants' relationship with God through listening prayer—whether they try to listen to God more and understand God and God's heart better.
3	How comfortable were you praying in silence with a group?	To assess a noticeable change of the participants' prayer life throughout the project.
4	Any challenges, changes, and fruits through listening prayer?	To gauge challenges, changes, and fruits through listening prayer—any changes in their attitudes, understanding of prayer, and practice of prayer in their lives.

### *Third Method: Focused Individual Interviews*

Focused individual interviews were conducted over the subsequent seven days post-project to capture immediate reflections and experiences from the participants. Initially intended for the final three weeks of the project, the plan was adjusted due to some participants' prior session absences, aiming for a richer data collection post-project. Following the conclusion of the fifth session, and with two additional sessions planned, the participants were informed of the option to schedule one-on-one interviews post-project. These interviews, conducted either in-person or virtually based on each participant's preference, aimed to gather data that was not easily accessible in a group setting, with confidentiality reaffirmed. The individual interview format provided participants with an intimate setting for reflection, facilitating personalized discussions

on their learning experiences and project feedback. Table 4 below provides the interview questions and their corresponding purposes.

Table 4. Focused Individual Interview Questions and Purposes

	Questions	Purposes
1	How comfortable were you praying before the project? Any change during the project?	To understand the participants' personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings about prayer life developed by the project.
2	How has your relationship with God changed after your participation in this project?	To discover the practical applications and spiritual fruits the participants can get from their own prayer lives.
3	Have you developed a better rhythm of your prayer life during the project?	To help the participants to know that silent prayer is not easy for anyone and assess any noticeable changes and progress in the group throughout the project.
4	Did you find the extended silence for listening prayer became easier and more comfortable as the weeks progressed? If yes, how so? If no, why not?	To assess personal experiences that each participant might not be able to share in a group setting—whether they find out listening prayer is a good tool for their spirituality and relationship with God and others or not.
5	What was the greatest fruit and challenge you experienced through the project?	To assess whether listening prayer helps them to learn and understand God and others more, whether they find any difficulties in listening prayer, if so, what caused that.
6	Do you feel you can now listen to others and embrace others' needs more than before? If yes, give an example. If no, reflect on why you think you did not.	To assess whether the participants discover any changes in their thoughts and attitudes in relationships and conversation with others through the project.
7	How can your church support your relationship with God?	To show the constant support from the pastor and the church for their spiritual growth and grasp the participants' needs for their continued spiritual growth to grow and serve as spiritual leaders of the church.

These methods and approaches were carefully curated and designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the project's influence on the participants' spiritual growth and leadership skills. Through the thoughtful integration of group and individual reflection, the project aimed to enhance both the personal and communal facets of participants' ministry and prayer lives.

## **Implementation**

### *Project Invitation and Participant Information*

The project targeted lay leaders currently in leadership positions within the church. To limit the participants and the group size, an initial email invitation was sent to the selected members of the 2023 Church Council beginning August 22, 2023. This invitation included a concise overview of the project. The Council comprised eight lay members, two ex-officio members—program staff—and the pastor, totaling eleven members.

Upon receiving initial responses from the first-round invited Church Council members, additional invitations were extended to others in leadership roles to meet the anticipated participation range of six to nine individuals. The selection process considered factors such as small group involvement, dedication level to the church ministry, background, interests, age, and gender to ensure diversity among participants. Leadership roles varied, encompassing positions such as the Church Council, Treasurer, Board of Trustees, Nominations and Leadership Development Committee, United Women in Faith (formerly, United Methodist Women) President, Men's Group Leader,

Adult Sunday School Leader, and Mission Team Leader. Some positions align with traditional roles or committees required by *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, while others do not.

Of the eleven individuals who received invitations, eight expressed interest and committed to participating in the project.<sup>1</sup> Upon confirmation of their participation, the Human Subject Informed Consent Form was emailed for their review and signature. All participants returned their signed forms prior to their first session, ensuring compliance with ethical considerations and establishing a foundation of informed consent for the research project.

#### *Project Structure and Session Design*

The project began on Wednesday, September 13, 2023, and continued for seven consecutive weeks until Wednesday, October 25, 2023. Each session was designed for an hour from 7:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. in an in-person setting. No virtual or make-up sessions were offered. The participants received reminder emails that included a summary of the previous session, when necessary, along with an opening question for the contemplation or an item to bring to the upcoming session.

The gathering room was equipped with comfortable armed chairs, a sofa, lamps, and side tables. This deliberate selection of a closed space aimed to foster a comfortable and secure atmosphere for open discussions and listening prayer in silence. A key consideration in choosing this closed space was to minimize distractions with no other

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<sup>1</sup> However, one of the participants withdrew after missing the first two sessions. Consequently, the final number of participants in the project was seven.

concurrent gatherings on the same floor during sessions, thereby eliminating potential noise disturbances from activities or programs in other rooms.

During the first session, the participants were provided with journals for self-reflection, emphasizing that their use was not intended for data collection.

Acknowledging diverse learning styles and personal preferences for self-reflection, additional tools, such as colored pencils and Play-Dohs, were supplied during the sessions.

The project “Training Empathetic Leadership through Listening Prayer” was primarily structured around two core components: education and practice. The general session outline is detailed in Table 5, with the educational segment lasting twenty or twenty-five minutes in each session. Listening prayer practice began with five minutes in the first three sessions and increased to ten minutes in the subsequent sessions to allow the participants to grow more accustomed to and comfortable with extended silent prayer.

Table 5. General Outline of Each Session

Session Contents	Time
Welcoming and opening prayer	5 minutes
Self-reflection on last week’s prayer life—challenges, changes, and fruits	10 minutes
Lesson	20 or 25 minutes
Practice of listening prayer	5 or 10 minutes
Self-reflection in silence and sharing experience of listening prayer	10 minutes
Sharing prayer request and closing prayer	5 minutes
Total time	60 minutes

Session 1 on Wednesday, September 13, 2023, initiated the project with a pre-project survey and twenty minutes of lesson on prayer, specifically focusing on listening prayer. Fundamental concepts were introduced: the distinctions between formal prayer and informal prayer, centering prayer as the foundation for listening prayer, *Lectio*

Divina as a method of sacred reading, contemplative prayer, Jesus Prayer<sup>2</sup>, and breath prayer. The participants were provided handouts on Contemplative Prayer<sup>3</sup> and *Lectio Divina*<sup>4</sup> for personal reference and further study.

Session 2 on Wednesday, September 20, 2023, began with a personal touch, inviting the participants to share an item representing the presence of God in their lives. The session delved into twenty-five minutes of lesson on Elijah's empathetic spiritual leadership in 1 Kings 17:8-16—the story of Elijah and the widow in Zarephath. Two versions of the scripture were distributed: the New Revised Standard Version and the New Living Translation. By examining Elijah's identity through the lenses of being a (1) a person of God, (2) a person of prayer, and (3) a person of empathy, the session provided rich insights into spiritual leadership.

Session 3 on Wednesday, September 27, 2023, began with the question, “Where did you recently see Jesus in your life?” It proceeded with a twenty-five-minute lesson on Korean Bible Women as empathetic spiritual leaders in early Korean Protestant history. The lesson contained the beginning of Korean Protestant Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, missional challenges in the Korean cultural background, and the Korean Bible Women's identity, contribution, and spiritual leadership.

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus Prayer is known as “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” or simply, “Jesus, mercy.”

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer: The Prayer of Consent* (Butler, NJ: Contemplative Outreach, 2016), [https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/method\\_cp\\_eng-2016-06\\_0.pdf](https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/method_cp_eng-2016-06_0.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Contemplative Outreach, *Lectio Divina: Listening to the Word of God in Scripture* (West Milford, NJ: Contemplative Outreach, 2023), [https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Lectio-Divina-2023-Brochure\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Lectio-Divina-2023-Brochure_WEB.pdf).

Session 4 on Wednesday, October 4, 2023, opened with the question, “How would you define your relationship with Jesus?”, prompting the participants to introspectively define their relationship with Jesus using a word or phrase. The session included a twenty-five-minute lesson on God’s empathetic revelation and presence in the doctrine of incarnation. This covered three main points: (1) incarnation as God *in* Jesus supported by Donald M. Baillie, (2) God’s empathetic revelation supported by Paul Tillich, and (3) Jesus’ empathetic presence as God’s active response and involvement supported by Rosemary Radford Ruether.

Session 5 on Wednesday, October 11, 2023, opened with the question, “What does prayer teach you?” Over the next twenty minutes, the session offered an in-depth exploration of Carl Rogers’ empathetic listening theory, also known as active listening theory. This section focused on explaining the definition of empathy compared to similar terms—sympathy, compassion, and mercy. It also discussed Carl Rogers’ perspective regarding empathetic listening theory as a problem-solving tool, and the application of empathetic listening to God.

Session 6 on Wednesday, October 18, 2023, opened with the question, “What does listening teach you?”, inquiring about the teachings derived from the act of listening—not just in prayer, but in broader applications. Various forms of prayer were introduced over twenty minutes to expand the participants’ knowledge and experiences, including Taizé music from the Taizé community in France, prayer beads, handheld cross, labyrinth, woodworking, drawing, and more. The session included listening to Taizé music as a form of prayer. The participants received a printed finger labyrinth along with a description.

Session 7 was held on Wednesday, October 25, 2023, marking the project's conclusion. Breaking from the established pattern, a ten-minute of listening prayer was placed as the beginning activity. Subsequently, a group discussion and post-project survey were conducted.

Table 6 shows the attendance records of the project, excluding me, the project researcher. Three participants attended all sessions, while one participant missed a single session. The remaining participants missed two, three, and four, respectively. All participants were present for a minimum of three out of seven sessions. They informed me in advance about their absence due to prescheduled out-of-town commitments, unforeseen family situations, and illness. The group received an email of each session's summary and an electronic file of the handout, when necessary. As shown in Table 6 below, two sessions had total attendance.

Table 6. Project Participant Attendance

Session Number	Date	Participant Attendance
Session 1	September 13, 2023	6
Session 2	September 20, 2023	5
Session 3	September 27, 2023	3
Session 4	October 4, 2023	5
Session 5	October 11, 2023	7
Session 6	October 18, 2023	6
Session 7	October 25, 2023	7

At each session, a different prayer or reading was shared before five or ten minutes of practicing listening prayer in a group setting to help the participants ease any possible anxiety in silence and focus on the shared words instead of internal distractions and thoughts during the time of listening prayer in silence. Table 7 informs the variety of



prayers and readings introduced at each session before the practice of silent listening prayer.

Table 7. Prayer or Reading Introduced Before Practice of Listening Prayer at Each Session

Session 1	The Welcoming Prayer by Thomas Keating
Session 2	Christ Has No Body by Teresa of Avila
Session 3	A writing from <i>Dialogues with Silence</i> by Thomas Merton <sup>5</sup>
Session 4	Let Your God Love You by Edwina Gateley
Session 5	A Prayer of Unknowing by Thomas Merton
Session 6	Prayer of St. Patrick <sup>6</sup>
Session 7	Thought 9 – Rest from <i>The Art of Pastoring</i> by William C. Martin

### Summary of Learning

This research project was conceived to develop empathetic leadership by helping participants learn and practice listening prayer. The projected aim was to cultivate empathy by actively listening to and embracing others' voices and needs in ministry. This section presents the data analysis derived from written pre-project and post-project surveys, group discussions, focused individual interviews, and my personal notes taken during and after the sessions. The following data substantiates that the project broadly aligns with the proposed hypothesis.

### *Project Effectiveness*

The project provided the participants with biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary foundations to enhance their understanding of empathetic leadership and

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<sup>5</sup> “Let me rest in Your will and be silent. Then the light of Your joy will warm my life. Its fire will burn in my heart and shine for Your glory. This is what I live for. Amen, amen.” Thomas Merton, *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers & Drawings*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 53.

<sup>6</sup> This prayer is also known as “Morning Prayer” or “St. Patrick’s Breastplate Prayer.”

its needs within a local church setting. The participants experienced more transparent, more profound, and more personal understanding of prayer. Initially, many participants' understanding of prayer was superficial, predominantly focused on formal and corporate prayer settings. A considerable number of the participants expressed doubts about informal prayer practices in daily life, including walking, driving, taking a shower, and washing dishes. It became evident that a substantial number of the participants lacked knowledge of what and how to pray. However, over the course of the project, all participants displayed increased curiosity, learned about various prayer acts and tools, and engaged in discussions about prayer at both individual and communal levels.

One of the significant achievements of the project was the active, sustained participation of the seven church leaders in learning and practicing listening prayer together for seven weeks. Acceptance and participation were notably positive, with seven of the eleven invitees (64%) joining and completing the project—a commendable figure considering the average Sunday worship attendance of eighty and the total number of leaders, which was fewer than twenty. The commitment of these seven leaders to learning about and practicing prayer together indicates the establishment of a prayer-centered culture among church leaders, serving as evidence of their willingness and openness for further learning and spiritual growth.

During the project, the church held a one-day Leadership Planning Retreat on a Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., open to all current and potential leaders. Eighteen individuals devoted six hours to sharing, planning, and envisioning the church's future. Four out of eighteen were project participants. The remaining three project participants, while expressed interest, were unable to attend due to personal commitments. Notably,

during sensitive discussions at the retreat, the project participants demonstrated a positive attitude of active listening and openness to the entire group, devoid of judgment, argument, debate, or an immediate rush to problem-solving. This positive attitude resonated within the larger group of eighteen participants.

Additionally, the project participants further exhibited enhanced listening attitudes and openness in other church ministry settings. Their flexibility and openness were evident in various ministry planning processes and discussions, particularly in handling complex personnel issues. Despite uncertainties and anxieties, the participants respectfully considered and accepted the ministry's needs, reflecting a commendable level of adaptability and cooperative spirit.

#### *Pre-Project and Post-Project Survey Analysis*

All seven participants completed both the pre-project and post-project surveys.

Question 1: In your own words, how would you describe the definition of prayer?

Responses to Question 1 in the pre-project survey reveal that six participants conceptualized prayer as a form of personal communication and conversation with God. Interestingly, two participants in the pre-project survey and four participants in the post-project survey used the term “listening” to articulate their understanding of prayer in the pre-project survey. Notably, three who mentioned “listening” in the post-project survey had not done so in the pre-project survey, suggesting that while the overall understanding of prayer may not have shifted dramatically, the concept of listening had become more integrated into the participants' prayer lives.

Question 2: In what ways can church leaders encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer? It was interesting to note that post-project survey responses were more practical and actionable than those from the pre-project survey. Notable responses from three participants in the post-project survey include:

“By example as part of church activities; Sponsoring focused prayer activities, including “how to pray”; Providing prayer pamphlets.”

“We can encourage prayer thru setting up times when church members can pray together wherever they may be, perhaps even specifying different focuses for different days. We can ask others to pray for us to encourage them to pray. Also, silent prayers during the Prayer of the People and our Prayer Quilt Ministry encourage prayer.”

“Participate in sessions dealing with the meaning of prayer and techniques for praying.”

Question 3: In what ways have church leaders failed to encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer? Both surveys’ responses show that most participants had a limited understanding of prayer. Yet, it is clearly shown that the participants recognize that the work of church leaders to strengthen the culture of prayer is not enough. Several notable responses from the post-project survey are:

“Accepting the expectations that only trained pastors can “really pray”—also rushing toward the end like we’re so glad to have gotten through a needed prayer.”

“Get caught up in details of church business.”

“Failure to deal with the need to educate church members on prayer.”

“We are perhaps not as open as we should be about the power of prayer and its ability to bring us closer to God.”

Question 4: What are the benefits of having others share with church leaders the particular of their prayers? Notable differences between the pre-project survey and post-project survey were not identified. Overall, the responses consistently highlighted the participants’ recognition of the importance of prayer in the context of church ministry. In the pre-project survey, a participant expressed, “Learning the needs of others in order to

improve church ministries.” In the post-project survey, another participant responded, “Knowing better the needs of others and exploring how the church and its programs can help.” These responses underscore a consistent understanding among the participants that sharing the specifics of prayers with church leaders is beneficial for enhancing the overall effectiveness of church ministries.

Question 5: In what cases do church leaders experience the significance of listening in ministry? Overall responses to this question on the significant of listening in ministry indicate that the perceived need for prayer in ministry is not confined to specific areas but extends across the entire ministry, encompassing both personal and communal levels. A participant, who did not provide a response to this question in the pre-project survey, shared in the post-project survey, “Listening to church members lets us better pray for them. Listening prayer trains us to be better attuned to God.” Another participant’s response in the pre-project survey was: ““Listening” to people increased empathy and understandings, adjustment to needs of people; “Listening” to God: I hope to learn that.” The participant’s response in the post-project survey was “Discerning the needs, concerns, interests of others—avoiding false assumptions and misunderstandings, recognizing how to best communicate a response.” This progress demonstrates a refined understanding of the multifaceted benefits of listening prayer in navigating interpersonal dynamics and fostering a more compassionate community. Another participant consistently highlighted the importance of listening, stating in the pre-project survey: “Listening to others’ thoughts and opinions may be of significant help in delivering the direction of the church” and “Listening can help to provide guidance for individuals, small groups, and the congregation as a whole. Hopefully to expand into a more thriving

and experienced congregation.” These responses underscore the participant’s recognition of listening as a key component for steering the church community in a positive and flourishing direction.

Question 6: What does God have to say about church leaders listening to others and God’s voice? Three participants struggled with this question in the pre-project survey, perhaps due to a lack of scriptural knowledge or understanding of empathetic leadership. A participant, who initially responded with “not sure” in the pre-project survey, provided a different response in the post-project survey: “The only scripture I can recall is we should confess our sins to one another, which would require that we listen to one another.” Another participant shared, “God encourages us to pray by giving thanks, by giving praise, by encouraging prayers for others, and by allowing us to ask for His help, guidance, and wisdom.”

Question 7: What are the benefits of listening to others and God’s voice in church ministry? A participant responded in the post-project survey, “The benefits are becoming closer to one another through understanding their needs and point of view, which helps us learn to love one another, and by loving and taking care of one another, we grow closer to God.” Another participant’s responses to the pre-project and post-project surveys are: “Meet the true needs of others, not assumed or perceived needs; Meet the calling of God,” and “Improved communication; Follow divine guidance; Improved understanding,” respectively. Another participant’s responses to the pre-project and post-project surveys are: “Everyone has opinions. We need to be careful that their opinions are God loved, not “Me” loved,” and “Listening to others can provide us with opportunities to adjust within God’s realm,” respectively. In the pre-project survey, another participant

stated, “If we listen to one another, we become closer to one another and to God,” while in the post-project survey, the participant added extra outcomes of listening, “The benefits are becoming closer to one another through understanding their needs and point of view, which helps us learn to love one another, and by loving and taking care of one another, we grow closer to God.” Overall, responses in both surveys indicate that the participants are aware of the various advantages of listening to other voices and God’s voice in church ministry, which will eventually contribute to their spiritual growth.

### *Group Discussion Analysis*

The group discussion took place for twenty or twenty-five minutes during the final session after ten minutes of listening prayer, with full attendance from all seven participants. This section offers a detailed analysis of the data gleaned from various questions, sharing, reflections, and discussions that transpired throughout the project, aiming to elucidate evident changes in the participants’ understanding and experience.

Question 1: How helpful or informative did you find today or through the project for your prayer life? Responses to this question underscored the project’s effectiveness in enhancing participants’ prayer lives. Early sessions highlighted challenges such as distractions and maintaining focus during listening prayer. However, by the final session, the participants found a ten-minute period of silence manageable, with comments like, “Ten minutes was getting shorter,” indicating a positive shift in their experience. Another participant said that the project taught and reminded them of different ways of prayer and prayer life. This sharing led the group to discuss the meaning and interpretation of prayer life—the meaning of “I am praying for.” Other responses were: “We often forget to give

thanks to God while asking for many things,” “Another aspect of prayer is praise. Sometimes I read hymns,” and “Listening was fascinating in the project.”

The group delved into discussions on the meaning and interpretation of prayer life, emphasizing gratitude, praise, and the fascinating aspect of listening. The need for broader prayer training within the congregation was expressed, showcasing increased interest in prayer beyond the project. The conversations about prayer persisted beyond the project’s scope, highlighting its lasting impact. Daily practice still seemed challenging to many of them, but their efforts to create a better prayer routine at a certain time were notable.

Question 2: What tools have you gained today or through the project for your prayer life? The participants acknowledged gaining valuable tools. A participant mentioned “listening as a tool and required relaxation to use the tool in a quiet space and time.” Two participants talked about a better prayer routine throughout the project. Another participant, who shared difficulty in listening at Session 2, appreciated a reading before listening prayer in silence. Also, another purpose for listening in the congregation was discussed, and online prayer time for the entire congregation as a routine was suggested as it was offered previously. After listening prayer at Session 6, another person also reflected on the power of sharing a prayer or reading before the silent time of listening prayer. These responses indicate that the participants gained practical skills and knowledge and felt they could enrich their personal prayer experiences.

Question 3: How comfortable were you praying in silence with a group? While the majority expressed comfort in praying silently as a group, one participant initially experienced discomfort. After the first session, including five minutes of listening prayer,



this person personally contacted me and requested to stay away from the group for the time of listening prayer in silence. The unease was addressed by providing an alternative space for listening prayer. Two people expressed no issues. Another felt comfortable. Another mentioned, “A good vibe from trying to do this together as a group.” Only one out of the seven participants did not feel comfortable to pray in silence with a group. These responses indicate that the majority felt comfortable praying in silence in a group setting. This particular question does not directly support the hypothesis focused on individual daily prayer, not in a group setting. Yet, the responses offered valuable insights into the varying comfort levels in a group setting.

Question 4: Any challenges, changes, and fruits through listening prayer? The participants openly discussed challenges, such as clearing their minds. Another pointed out a challenge to listen because we are not accustomed to doing so while thinking internally or convincing others that “Your idea is wrong.” The participant also mentioned a conflicted prayer for two sports teams in a game. In Session 6, this person talked about the required patience and mental combat while listening, not mainly listening prayer, because of preformative thought. Another questioned, “Are we listening to God? Are we listening for God?” then continued, “I have listened for God.” A participant appreciated the sharing. Another expressed a challenge, “Intercessory prayer doesn’t make sense,” which was previously shared several times throughout the project. Another appreciated the question.

Six out of the seven participants responded to this question, and active discussion was held in a group. While challenges were prominent in the responses, a comprehensive exploration of changes and fruits was not as explicit. It does not directly mean that

listening prayer has no positive changes and fruits in their personal and communal lives.

A separation of questions for challenges, changes, and fruits might have collected valuable data for three parts of the questions—challenges, changes, and fruits through listening prayer.

In summary, the group discussion proved instrumental in unraveling the project's multifaceted impact on the participants' prayer perceptions, practices, and challenges, further affirming the project's positive influence on their spiritual growth as empathetic leaders. Initially, some participants displayed a considerably narrowed perception of prayer. For instance, in Session 2, a participant questioned, "If everything is supposed to happen, what should I do?" Another participant also questioned about God's intervention in a situation or a person that prayer is undone. Yet, over the course of the project, the entire group showed an increased interest and gained knowledge of prayer, as clearly shown by the group discussion.

#### *Focused Individual Interview Analysis*

Four of the seven participants responded to the request for a one-on-one interview. For the sake of closed data analysis, the participants were anonymized as Respondent 1 (R1) through Respondent 4 (R4). Selected questions of the following questions were asked: (1) How comfortable were you praying before the project? Any change during the project? (2) How has your relationship with God changed after your participation in this project? (3) Have you developed a better rhythm of your prayer life during the project? (4) Did you find the extended silence for listening prayer became easier and more comfortable as the weeks progressed? If yes, how so? If no, why not? (5)

What was the greatest fruit and challenge you experienced through the project? (6) Do you feel you can now listen to others and embrace others' needs more than before? If yes, give an example. If no, reflect on why you think you did not. (7) How can your church support your relationship with God?

R1 highlighted the distinction between active listening and listening prayer because they require different skills: "We did not practice active listening, but listening prayer" in the project. R1 also pointed out that while listening habit is an act of waiting for the time I/we can talk and point out, listening prayer needs motivation, not skills. For example, Carl Rogers' active listening skills are not directly related to listening prayer. As taught in Session 1, R1 associated listening prayer with the words like "communion" and "compassion." R1 showed the greatest interest among the participants before, during, and after the project, and introduced to the group and me different resources related to God's muteness, empathy, and active listening.

R2 entered the project already comfortable with prayer but experienced a deepening connection to personal prayer life. Through the project, R2 experienced a shift from focusing on others to a greater focus on self in prayer, feeling promoted to draw closer to God personally. This participant's increased openness in discussing the church with non-Christians indicated a positive impact. During the project, R2 talked to non-Christians, including her Book Club members and work fellows, about the church's mission and her learning from the project. It barely happened previously. As the weeks progressed, R2 felt less cautious during listening prayer, expressing a broader interest in learning and practicing prayer beyond listening. A noticeable response was, "The whole experience of the project was helpful for me." R2's journey from caution to openness in

listening prayer exemplifies the spiritual development and increased interest in knowing more about prayer and practicing it in personal and communal life. R2 recognized the need for congregational prayer culture and practice.

R3, with extensive learning experiences in religions and philosophical realms for many years, complimented the project and found comfort in the shared sentiments of other participants. Despite a challenge in understanding intercessory prayer, R3 displayed a strong interest in learning additional prayer tools and their historical backgrounds, particularly regarding prayer beads and labyrinth. R3's responses indicated a unique blend of intellectual curiosity and a desire for an academic understanding of divinity, spiritual relationships, and prayer.

R4 had limited attendance due to pre-scheduled commitments but expressed a desire for more participation. Despite these attendance constraints, R4 encountered no issues with the ten minutes of silent group prayer in a group setting. Notably, R4 provided feedback stating, "Listening is interesting and useful." This feedback reflects R4's strong desire for spiritual growth and formation not only through prayer life but also through daily meditation in a group and with the church members.

In conclusion, the focused individual interviews provided valuable insights into each participant's learning styles, interests, backgrounds, and personal prayer life. Before the project, it was presumable that the leaders of the church would have had a knowledge and understanding of prayer, even though they did not have a daily prayer practice in

their personal lives. Yet, the interviews revealed diverse perspectives, individual growth, and expanded interest beyond an act of listening prayer as leaders of the church.

*Correlational Project Review: The Project Setting and Design*

The most significant insight gained from the project was the realization that the participants' Christian leadership was not inherently connected to their knowledge, understanding, and practice of prayer in their personal lives. This discovery emerged from observing the ways in which each participant presented a different definition and interpretation of prayer, along with distinct approaches to incorporating prayer into the practice of prayer in their personal lives. Ongoing discussions within the group revolved around topics such as how to pray, what subjects to pray about, how to listen, and what to listen for. The collective consensus within the group acknowledged the effort and practice required to shift personal focus from speaking to listening. Despite the participants exhibiting no issues with practicing listening prayer during the final session, there remains a question regarding whether the project would more noticeably align with the hypothesis under modified settings and conditions.

First, the project exhibited an imbalance between its educational and practical components, the two main pillars of its design, and thus revealed a discrepancy between its educational content and practical exercises. The actual practice of listening prayer constituted only five or ten minutes at each session, accounting for a mere 8-17% of the project's total duration. Even when considering the time allocated for reading a prayer and sharing reflections before and after the practice of listening prayer, respectively, the project's design disproportionately emphasized teaching and learning aspects over

practical application. For comparison, centering prayer recommends a minimum of twenty minutes.<sup>7</sup> Recent social science research advocates for short meditation sessions of seven minutes, demonstrating stress reduction and impacting emotions positively and negatively by increasing and decreasing them, respectively.<sup>8</sup> A behavioral brain research allocated thirteen minutes of daily guided meditation to test how brief, practical meditation practices influence cognitive functioning in non-experienced meditators (ages 18-45).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, loving-kindness and compassion meditation, based on Buddhist practice and mindfulness-based therapy, set fifteen to twenty minutes for meditation.<sup>10</sup> Extending listening prayer sessions could enhance the balance between education and practice and provide more noticeable results of listening prayer from the perspective of empathetic leadership.

Second, the project could be strengthened by placing a more focused emphasis on listening prayer rather than empathy. While the project aimed to foster empathy, the primary tool employed was listening prayer. The dual emphasis on empathy and listening prayer might have confused the participants, especially when the connection between the two was not explicitly clarified. Definitions of empathetic leadership and listening prayer

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Method of Centering Prayer*.

<sup>8</sup> Chunxia Sun, Jiajin Tong, Xin Qi, Zhonghui He, and Junwei Qian, "Effects of 7-minute Practices of Breathing and Meditation on Stress Reduction," *PsyCh Journal* (November 2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pchj.702>.

<sup>9</sup> Julia C. Basso, Alexandra McHale, Victoria Ende, Douglas J. Oberlin, and Wendy A. Suzuki, "Brief, Daily Meditation Enhances Attention, Memory, Mood, and Emotional Regulation in Non-experienced Meditators," *Behavioural Brain Research* 356 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbr.2018.08.023>.

<sup>10</sup> Stefan G. Hofmann, Paul Grossman, and Devon E. Hinton, "Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditation: Potential for Psychological Interventions," *Clinical Psychology Review* 31, no 7 (2011): 1126-32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2011.07.003>.

were not provided over time with sufficient information and designated time for discussion. Listening to people is distinct from listening to God, as we cannot expect direct and instant responses from God all the time while we might from people. Along the same line, incorporating more practical techniques of listening prayer would be beneficial for the participants.

Third, the chosen methodology for data collection had limitations in evaluating one's empathy. Although the project demonstrated that listening prayer contributed to increased empathy, different evaluation tools may reinforce the measurement of this change and its evaluation. The Center for Creative Leadership employed at least three subordinates to rate the empathy of 6,731 leaders in researching the correlation between empathy and leadership performance.<sup>11</sup> This approach underscores the idea that evaluation by individuals engaged in constant interactions with the project participants could provide more accurate data regarding changes in empathy before and after the project. Another assessment tool for empathy is the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i). The emotional intelligence assessment, developed by the Emotional Intelligence Training Company, evaluates empathy level as one of the fifteen EQ competencies.<sup>12</sup> The basic assessment is designed as a self-rating assessment tool. However, it offers an option to add multi-raters.<sup>13</sup> This choice supports the research setup of the Center for Creative

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<sup>11</sup> William A. Gentry, Todd J. Weber, and Golnaz Sadri, *Empathy in the Workplace: A Tool for Effective Leadership* (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 2016), 11, <https://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/empathyintheworkplace.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Emotional Intelligence Training Company, *EQ-i*, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.eitrainingcompany.com/eq-i/>.

<sup>13</sup> This assessment tool is called EQ 360. The Emotional Intelligence Training Company recommends this option rather than EQ-i, as it values others' feedback to reinforce one's performance improvement and leadership development.

Leadership, which includes subordinates to rate their supervisors' empathy level. This method will provide more valuable results supporting the effectiveness of the project to measure the participants' empathy.

### **Conclusion**

The project "Training Empathetic Leadership through Listening Prayer" has yielded substantial evidence supporting the hypothesis that the knowledge and practice of listening prayer enable participants to be empathetic by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in the ministry. Drawing upon Carl Rogers' empathetic listening theory, the project posited empathy as a skill that can be developed and honed. By weaving together the biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary foundations, the project aimed to foster an understanding of empathetic leadership and its need in the context of a local church.

From an educational standpoint, the project successfully provided new knowledge, sparking a heightened interest in empathy among the participants. Despite the project's brief span—seven sessions incorporating five or ten minutes of listening prayer at each—the participants displayed increased interest and comfort with various forms of prayer, particularly listening prayer and its practice in a group setting. All participants engaged at ease in a ten-minute listening prayer during the final session of the project. This highlights a significant achievement.

A standout success of the project is the active participation of the seven lay leaders of the church, who collaboratively engaged in learning and practicing listening prayer on weekday evenings for seven weeks. Their efforts signify the cultivation of a



prayer-centric culture among church leaders and serve as tangible proof of both personal and communal spiritual growth. The participants demonstrated open-minded and nonjudgmental attitudes, fostering a space and atmosphere where diverse opinions were welcomed. These attitudes were found at the actual sessions and other situations.

While the participants unquestionably absorbed academic insights into the importance of empathetic leadership, I acknowledge its limitations in exclusively addressing cognitive empathy. The knowledge of empathy may not propel the participants to another level—emotional or compassionate facets of empathy. Similarly, the project refrains from establishing a definitive connection between empathetic gestures and attitudes observed and the direct influence of the project. This limitation stems from the recognition that each participant's social and emotional maturity cannot be entirely separate from spiritual maturity. The project lacked a tool to analyze each participant's social and emotional intelligence and their reciprocal relationship with the practice of listening prayer.

For further study, it may be valuable to extend the duration of the project, each session, and the practice of listening prayer. This extension would enable a more distinctive exploration by expanding possible ministry settings and occasions for lay leadership to practice listening prayer in their daily lives and empathetic listening to others in ministry. To obtain more accurate data collection, the empathetic leadership of each participant could be evaluated by using an Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) and rated by others who interact with them regularly. This assessment tool would offer comprehensive insights into the participants' empathy, providing a holistic evaluation of their spiritual growth and development. To gain more relevant data collection, pre-project

and post-project survey questionnaires, group discussion questions, and focused individual questions could also be thoroughly reviewed with professional associates and context associates with sufficient time to review and communicate ahead of the project implementation. Their professional knowledge, experience, and backgrounds would certainly contribute to generating more meaningful questionnaires for valuable data.

In addition, future studies may evaluate participants' leadership capacities after the project. Expecting participants to sustain their interest in empathetic leadership and practice listening prayer in their personal lives, they could serve as spiritual pillars within their small groups, committees, or teams at the church by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in ministry. The ongoing daily practice of listening prayer will hold the potential to fortify the church's spiritual foundation, providing crucial support during periods of uncertainty, such as the General Conference and its aftermath in the next few years. This spiritual foundation will undoubtedly produce invaluable fruits as the church navigates various changes that may evoke uncertainties and anxieties within the congregation. Trained empathetic leadership through listening prayer will play a critical role in the upcoming season of the United Methodist Church by listening to others' voices and needs and embracing them in the ministry.

**APPENDIX A**  
**PRE-PROJECT SURVEY**

**PRE-PROJECT SURVEY**

Session 1: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2023

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the project "Training Empathetic Leadership through Listening Prayer." After completing this survey, seal it in a given envelope and write your name. After a post-project survey during Session 7, you will open the envelope including this survey and seal both surveys in a new envelope without a name. This way, your survey will remain anonymous while each participant's surveys can be effectively used for data analysis.

**1. In your own words, how would you describe the definition of prayer?****2. In what ways can church leaders encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer?****3. In what ways have church leaders failed to encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer?**

**4. What are the benefits of having others share with church leaders the particular of their prayers?**

**5. In what cases do church leaders experience the significance of listening in ministry?**

**6. What does God have to say about church leaders listening to others and God's voice?**

**7. What are the benefits of listening to others and God's voice in church ministry?**

**APPENDIX B**  
POST-PROJECT SURVEY

**POST-PROJECT SURVEY**

Session 7: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2023

Thank you for participating in the project "Training Empathetic Leadership through Listening Prayer." After completing this survey, open the envelope of your pre-project survey and seal both surveys in a new envelope without your name. This way, your survey will remain anonymous while each participant's surveys can be effectively used for data analysis.

**1. In your own words, how would you describe the definition of prayer?**

**2. In what ways can church leaders encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer?**

**3. In what ways have church leaders failed to encourage others to participate in the ministry of prayer?**

**4. What are the benefits of having others share with church leaders the particular of their prayers?**

**5. In what cases do church leaders experience the significance of listening in ministry?**

**6. What does God have to say about church leaders listening to others and God's voice?**

**7. What are the benefits of listening to others and God's voice in church ministry?**



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